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THE CULT OF TREES AND TREE-WORSHIP IN BUDDHIST-HINDU SCULPTURE

M. S. RANDHAWA

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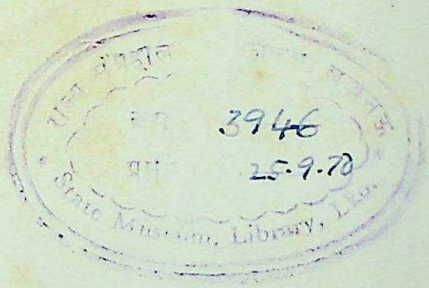

M. S. Randhawa

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To

B. P. Pal

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CHAPTER I

Tree Worship

Tree worship was possibly the earliest and the most prevalent form of religion. It was through the worship of trees that man attempted to approach and propitiate God. Before man developed agriculture he lived mostly on the fruits of trees and the flesh of wild animals. Trees provided him shelter against inclement weather and also fruits and nuts as food. He used their wood for implements of peace or war. It was from wood alone that he obtained fire which enabled him to cook his food and to warm his cave dwellings. Apart from these it is the beauty of their flowers which excited his imagination. As Fergusson observes "With all their poetry, and all their usefulness, we can hardly feel astonished that the primitive races of mankind should have considered trees as the choicest gift of the gods to men, and should have believed that their spirits still delighted to dwell among their branches, or spoke oracles through the rustling of their leaves." [1]

The narrative in the Bible centres round the planting of trees of Life and Knowledge in the garden of Eden. Marshall observes : ". . . . .the two ideas of wisdom and life being so closely interwoven in the Mesopotamian myth, there is reason to suspect that in an earlier version of the Eden story there was only one tree functioning for both." [2]

According to Jewish tradition the Tree of Life was a date-palm. In the Book of Enoch it is described thus : "And amongst them (the "fragrant trees") was a tree such as I had never yet smelt, neither was any amongst them nor were others like it ; it had a fragrance beyond all fragrance, and its leaves and blossoms and wood wither not for ever : and its fruit is beautiful, and its fruit resembles the dates of the palm."

In the Chinese mythology the "world tree" that supports the universe is the gigantic peach tree, whose fruit is partaken of by gods and men. It is believed to be a native of the paradise and growing among the Kwun-lun mountains in Tibet.

In Japanese stories the Tree of Life is mentioned as growing on mountain Horai in the island of Horaizan. The tree is described as having a trunk and branches of gold, roots of silver, and fruits and leaves of gems. In some stories there are three trees, the peach, the

1. Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, p. 2.
2. Marshall, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, p. 143.

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plum, and the pine. The "fungus of immortality" is also mentioned as growing in the shade of one or another of the holy trees, usually the pine. It is believed that besides the famous fungus, a "grass of immortality" also grew on the sacred islands. The pine-tree of Takasago is still regarded in Japan as a symbol of longevity ; and it figures prominently in many Japanese choruses and plays. It is conspicuous in the festival of the San-ga-nichi when pine branches are used for decorating the gate-ways during the New Year festivities.

In Egypt the "world tree" was the sycamore whose shade was so welcome in the brazen glare of Egypt. It is represented with peasants gathered round fervently paying their devotions to it, and making offerings of fruit and vegetables and jars of water. It was always held as sacred to Nut and Hathor, and their doubles were believed to inhabit it, a certain species being regarded as "the living body of Hathor on earth" ; indeed, the Memphite Hathor was called the "Lady of the Sycamore".

Among the Greeks the oak or beech was the emblem of Jupiter, the laurel of Apollo, and the olive of Minerva. The myrtle was sacred to Aphrodite, and the apple belonged to Juno. The poplar was the tree of Hercules and the plane tree was the "numen" of the Atridae. The oak grove at Dodona remained an oracle till the time of Constantine. "It was from the branches of this time-honoured tree that the sacred pigeons, combining the rustling of their wings with that of the leaves, made up those sounds which were interpreted as oracles throughout the whole period of Grecian history. It was not, however, only as a shelter for the sacred pigeons, or that the wind might rustle through their leaves and agitate the bells that hung among their branches, that the trees of the Dodonian grove were held to be sacred. Tradition ascribed to them the power of speaking for themselves, and even when cut down, as in the case of the ship Argo, a piece of the sacred oak inserted either in prow or keel, had the power of communicating to these adventurous navigators the will of Jove." [3]

The ancient Germans worshipped their gods in groves and woods. They had no images and they declined to enclose their gods within walls. Grimm made the important discovery that the word 'temple' first meant the sacred grove. Sacred groves were common in Germany and even now Germans adore trees and forests. "The most frequent mention, however, of the sacred groves and trees of the Germans is to be found in the earlier Christian writers, who, when narrating the events that accompanied the conversion of the nation to Christianity, relate how these were cut down and destroyed, in order that the old superstitions might be eradicated." [4]

In the Norse mythology the "Tree of Universe" is a huge ash tree, called Yggdrasil which was the chief and holiest seat of the gods and under it they assembled every day in council. "All father next created a huge ash called Yggdrasil, the tree of the universe, of time, or of life, which filled all the world, taking root not only in the remotest depths of Nifl-heim, where bubbled the spring Hvergelmir, but also in Midgard, near Mimir's well (the ocean), and in Asgard, near the Urdar fountain. From its three great roots the tree attained such marvellous height that its topmost bough, called Lerad (the peace-

3. Fergusson, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
4. *Ibid*, p. 22.

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giver), overshadowed Odin's hall, while the other wide-spreading branches towered over the other worlds. An eagle was perched on the bough Lerad, and between his eyes sat the falcon Vedfolnir, sending his piercing glances down into heaven, earth, and Nifl-heim, and reporting all that he saw. As the tree Yggdrasil was ever green, its leaves never withering, it served as pasture-ground not only for Odin's goat Heidrun, which supplied the heavenly mead, the drink of the gods, but also for the stag Dain, Dvalin, Duneyr, and Durathor, from whose horns honey-dew dropped down upon the earth and furnished the water for all the rivers in the world. In the seething cauldron Hvergelmir, close by the great tree, a horrible dragon, called Nidhug, continually gnawed the roots, and was helped in his work of destruction by countless worms, whose aim it was to kill the tree, knowing that its death would be the signal for the down-fall of the gods. It was, of course, essential that the tree Yggdrasil should be maintained in a perfectly healthy condition, and this duty was performed by the Norns, or Fates, who daily sprinkled it with the holy waters from the Urdar fountain. This water, as it trickled down to earth through branches and leaves, supplied the bees with honey. From either edge of Nifl-heim, arching high above Midgard, rose the sacred bridge Bifrost (Assbru, the rainbow) built of fire, water, and air, whose quivering and changing hues it retained, and over which the gods travelled to and fro to the earth or to the Urdar well, at the foot of the ash Yggdrasil, where they daily assembled in council." [5]

It is said that Odin once fell in love with the giantess Grid, and from the union was born Vidar, surnamed 'the silent'. He lived in a palace decorated with green boughs and flowers, situated in the midst of an impenetrable primaeval forest. The taciturn god Vidar is a personification of the primaeval forest. Guerber believes that the conception of the silent Vidar was inspired by the rugged northern scenery. He observes, "Who has ever wandered through such forests, in a length of many miles, in a boundless expanse, without a path, without a goal, amid their monstrous shadows, their sacred gloom, without being filled with deep reverence for the sublime greatness of Nature above all human agency, without feeling the grandeur of the idea which forms the basis of Vidar's essence ?" [6] Seated upon his throne Vidar ponders over eternity, futurity and infinity. He was silent as the grave—a silence which indicates that no man knows what awaits him in the life to come.

"Vidar was not only a personification of the imperishability of Nature, but he was also a symbol of resurrection and renewal, exhibiting the eternal truth that new shoots and blossoms will spring forth to replace those which have fallen into decay." [7]

Apart from the gods we have mentioned above the Norsemen also believed in elves, tiny creatures who inhabited the realms of air between heaven and earth. "The elves were so small that they could flit about unseen while they tended the flowers, birds, and butterflies ; and as they were passionately fond of dancing, they often glided down to earth on a moonbeam, to dance on the green. Holding one another by the hand, they would dance in circles, thereby making the "fairy rings," which were to be discerned by the deeper green and greater luxuriance of the grass which their little feet had pressed." [8]

'Golden Bough' is the name which Frazer gave to mistletoe growing on oak trees. There

5-8. Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen.*

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was a common belief that mistletoe protected the house from thunder and lightning. Druids and the Norsemen both regarded it as sacred. In Scandinavia enemies met under mistletoe, became reconciled and gave each other the kiss of peace. It was also used for curing diseases. It is rarely that mistletoe grows on the oak, and it was on this account that the Druids regarded it with reverence.

In England the first of May was celebrated as a festive occasion in which Maypole dances, Mayqueens and Jack in the Green played prominent part.

The apple-tree was The tree of Paradise in Celtic mythology and fruit and blossom appeared on the same tree at the same time. If this happens on earth, however, or if apple trees bloom out of season, it is a sign of death. A form of tree worship in respect of apple tree persisted in England into modern times and was known as ' Wassailing the apple-tree'. The object was to ensure a bumper crop. On the 17th of January, people visit apple orchards and pour cider round the roots of the apple trees. A cake was placed in the fork, guns were fired through the branches, and the worshippers sang, "Hats full, caps full, three bushel bags full". After the ceremony, worshippers returned to the village inn entering by the back door, and after drinking cider left by the front entrance. It was supposed to bring good luck to the inn-keeper and also ensured a bumper crop. The apple was regarded as a protected tree and it was regarded as very unlucky to cut an apple orchard ; the injunction was, "Burn not the sweet apple tree of drooping branches, of the white blossoms, to whose gracious head each man puts forth his hand." [9]

Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) which is a common river side tree growing on moist soil is regarded as a witch tree which people do not like to grow near their houses. According to Christians, the cross on which Christ was crucified was made of alder wood.

Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), a small tree common in the British Islands, has scarlet berries and spiny evergreen leaves. Being strong and prickly, it was greatly feared by witches, and was regarded as specially lucky to men. This tree has become associated with Christmas as the red berries are supposed to symbolise the drops of blood and the thorny leaves the suffering of Christ. Its evergreen leaves were used by the Druids for decorating their houses during winter to provide shelter to the woodland spirits till spring time when they provided fresh foliage to the bare trees which were their abode.

The weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*), a native of China, now common in India as well as Europe, with its graceful pendulous branches has been regarded as a symbol of sorrow. It is regarded as a symbol of the famous Persian lover Majnu, and is also regarded as a symbol of a heart-broken woman. In Indian painting the love-lorn lady separated from her lover is usually shown standing under a willow tree, and in English folk-song the disappointed lady asks her lover to grow a willow tree on her grave. It was a protected tree of the Celtic people and the injunction of the Celtic priests was, "Burn not the noble willow, the unfailing ornament of poems ; bees drink from its blossoms, all delight in the graceful tent."

9. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race.*

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Poplar which is usually grown on damp soil is called by the Romans *Arbor Populi*—tree of the people—and was a symbol of democratic freedom. Poplars are regarded as the grief-stricken sisters of Phaeton, transformed into trees. It is said that Phaeton obtained permission to drive the horses of the Sun for one day. He became frightened and Jupiter fearing the consequences of this mad drive, threw him from the chariot into the river Po, where he was drowned. His grief-stricken sisters came to the bank of the river and wept for so°long that ultimately they were transformed into poplars growing by the side of the river bank.

Lime (*Tilia cordata*) is a long-lived tree, whose life period is five centuries. It must not be confused with the citrus plant which is common in India, which is also called lime or lemon. The real lime is a stately tree, which attains a height of eighty to ninety feet, and a girth exceeding twenty-five feet. It has heart-shaped glabrous leaves and yellowish-white flowers with abundance of nectar. The lime tree was regarded as a symbol of popular freedom during the Middle Ages, and the Swiss in their struggle for freedom, planted lime trees commemorating each of their victory against Charles the Bold.

Birch (*Betula pendula*), christened as the Lady of the Woods by Coleridge, is a graceful hardy forest tree in Great Britain. Its paper-like, silvery white bark peels off like rolls of paper. From the birch were made 'fasces' or bundles of rods which combined with an axe, formed the lictor, the symbol of the Roman Magistrate. The rods symbolized corporal punishment and the axe capital punishment. This symbol was adopted by the Fascists who believed in the Roman ideals of discipline, order, and unity.

The creepers are regarded as symbols of the female ; the madhavi creeper in ancient India, the wisteria in Japan, and the ivy in England. The Greeks and Romans used to present ivy to the bride and the bridegroom at a wedding as symbol of fidelity. Tristan and Iseult of Cornwall were well-known lovers whose devoted love made them proverbial in the Middle Ages. It is said that Iseult on finding her lover Tristan dead straightaway breathed her last upon his corpse. Their dead bodies were buried in separate graves at Cornwall. A briar grew out of the grave of Tristan and creeping slowly along the wall descended into Iseult's grave. It was thrice cut down by the order of Mark, the King of Cornwall, but it persisted in growing. An ivy creeper grew out of Iseult's grave, and the briar and the ivy twined tenderly around each other.

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Fig. 1. Seal from Mohenjo-daro showing a stylised Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa* Linn). c. 3000 B. C.

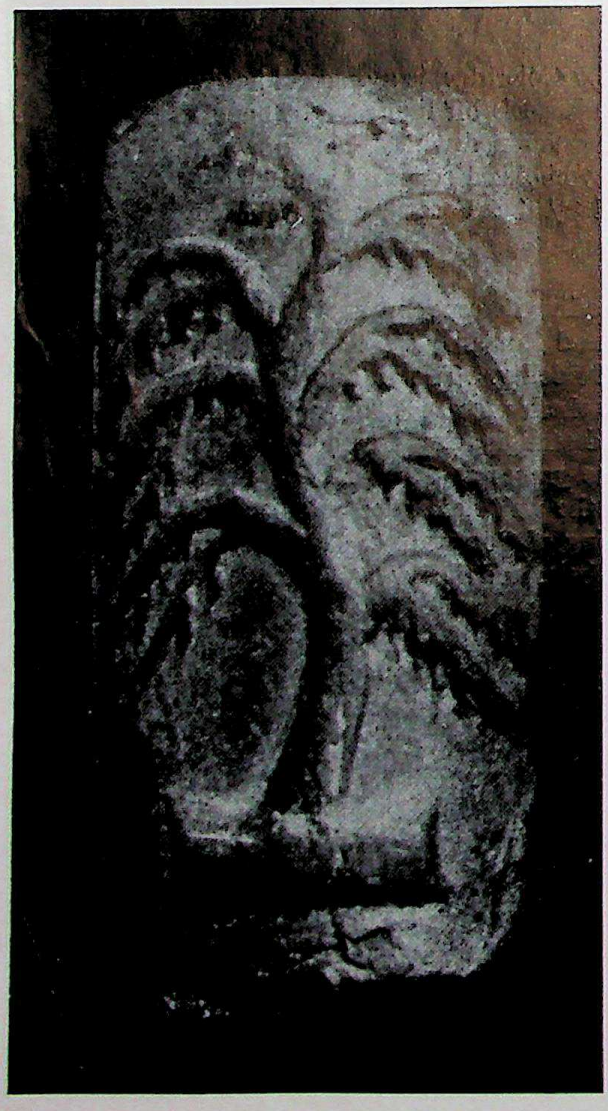
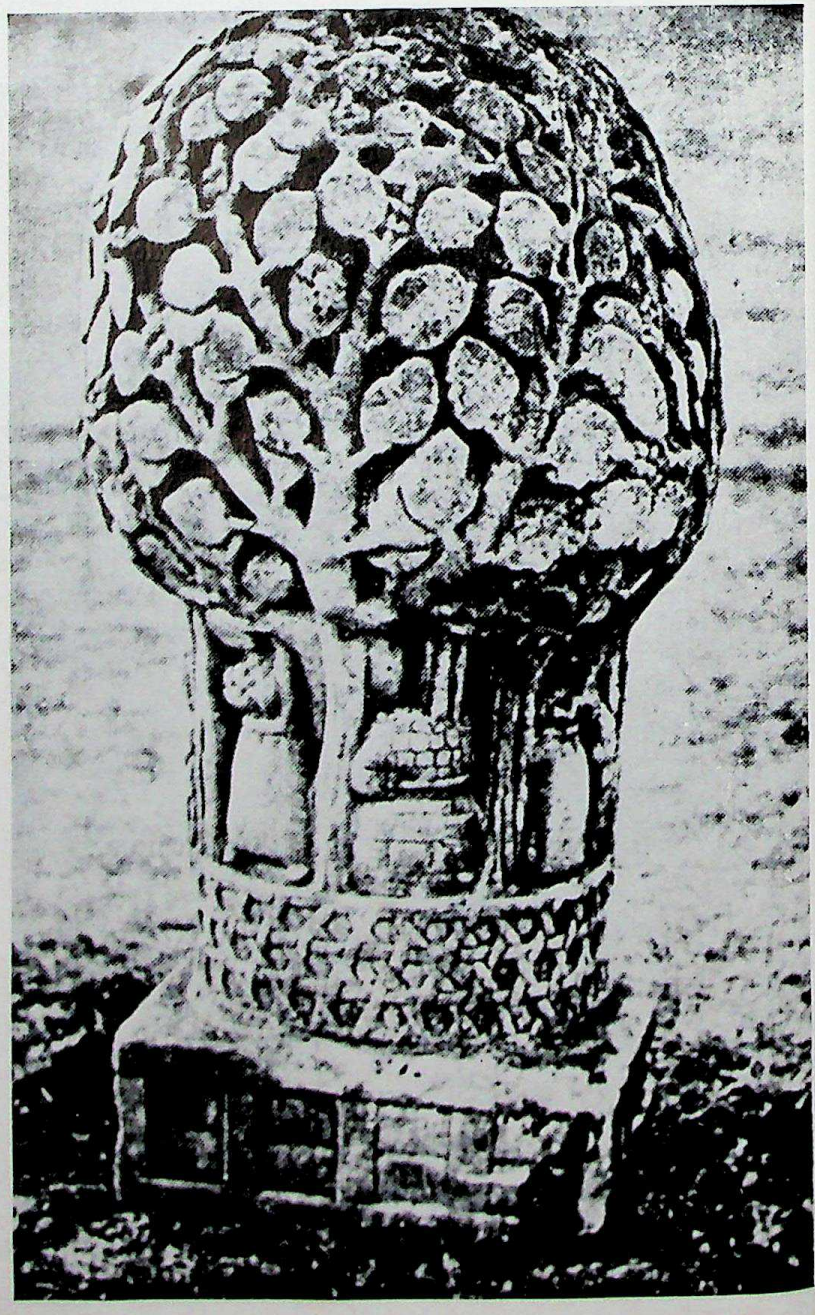


Fig. 2. Seal from Harappa showing a weeping willow tree (*Salix babylonica*). c. 1500 B. C.

Fig. 3. Kalpa vriksha of Besnagar. Possibly *Ficus bengalensis* Linn. 3rd Century B. C.



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CHAPTER II

Tree Worship in India

In India tree worship was common in the third or fourth millennium B. C. Among the seals of Mohen-jo-daro dating from that period is one depicting a stylised pipal tree with two heads of unicorns emerging from its stem (Fig. 1). A seal from Harappa is engraved with the likeness of a weeping willow tree with hanging branches (Fig. 2). It seems tree worship was widely prevalent in India before the rise of Buddhism. Amongst a vast tropical monsoon forest which extended over the entire surface of northern India were dotted small villages in the forest clearings. The farmers and herdsmen carried on a precarious cultivation in fields which were protected by fences of thorny bushes from wild animals like elephants, antelopes and wild buffaloes. Mango was their popular fruit tree and shady trees like pipal, banyan, gular and pakur provided welcome shade against the scorching heat of the sun in the summer months. In an environment full of danger to life the trees were their friends. That is why they regarded them as beneficent *devtas*.

Buddhism adopted the cult of tree worship from the older religions which prevailed in the country. The trees which are associated with the birth of the Buddha are sal, asoka and plaksha. Gautama got enlightenment under the friendly shade of a pipal tree which was henceforth called the Bodhi tree, and he died in a grove of sal trees. It was on account of these associations with the Buddha that these trees were regarded as sacred by the Buddhists.

To understand the association of trees with the Buddha it is necessary to know facts regarding his life. These are recapitulated below.

The birth of the Buddha has been thus described. "Queen Mahamaya bearing the Bodhisattva for ten months like oil in a bowl, when her time was come, desired to go to her relatives' house, and addressed king Suddhodana, "I wish, O King, to go to Devadaha, the city of my family". The king approved, and caused the road from Kapilavatthu to Devadaha to be made smooth and adorned with vessels filled with plantains, flags, and banners, and seating her in a golden palanquin borne by a thousand courtiers sent her with a great retinue. Between the two cities and belonging to the inhabitants of both is a pleasure grove of sal trees named the Lumbini grove. At that time from the roots to the tips of the branches it was one mass of flowers, and from within

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the branches and flowers hosts of bees of the five colours and various flocks of birds sported, singing sweetly."

"When the queen saw it, a desire to sport in the grove arose. The courtiers brought the queen and entered the grove. She went to the foot of a great sal tree, and desired to seize a branch. The branch like the tip of a supple reed bent down and came within reach of her hand. Stretching out her hand she seized the branch. Thereupon she was shaken with the throes of birth. So the multitude set up a curtain for her and retired. Holding the branches and even while standing she was delivered." [1]

In another account the descent of the Bodhisattva in the form of an elephant is described as a dream of Maya. 'On waking she goes with her women to a grove of asoka trees and sends for the king, who is unable to enter, until the gods of the Pure Abode inform him of what has happened.' It is further mentioned that 'she seizes not a sal branch, but a *plaksha* at the moment of birth'. Sal and plaksha (*Butea monosperma* Lam). Taub. are both common trees in the Nepal terai in which the birth-place of the Buddha is situated.

Lumbini garden was visited by the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsiang in the seventh century A.D. He also mentions an asoka tree under which the Buddha was born. "To the north-east of the arrow well about 80 or 90 li, we come to the Lumbini (Lavani) garden. Here is the bathing tank of the Sakyas, the water of which is bright and clear as a mirror, and the surface covered with a mixture of flowers. To the north of this 24 or 25 paces there is an asoka-flower tree, which is now decayed ; this is the place where Bodhisattva was born on the eighth day of the second half of the month called Vaisakha, which corresponds with us to the eighth day of the third month".

It was under the pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) that Gautama received enlightenment. This tree was also seen by Hiuen Tsiang. He has given the following account. "From this south-west 14 or 15 li, not far from the place of penance, there is a Pippala (Pi-po-lo) tree under which is a 'diamond throne'. All the past Buddhas seated on this throne have obtained true enlightenment, and so will those yet to come. Pray, then, proceed to that spot. The Bodhi tree above the diamond throne is the same as the Pippala tree. In old days, when Buddha was alive, it was several hundred feet high. Although it has often been injured by cutting, it still is 40 or 50 feet in height. Buddha sitting under this tree reached perfect wisdom, and therefore it is called the (*Samyak sambodhi*) tree of knowledge (Pu-ti-Bodhi). The bark is of a yellowish-white colour, the leaves and twigs of a dark green. The leaves wither not either in winter or summer, but they remain shining and glistening all the year round without change. But at every successive Nirvana-day (of the Buddhas) the leaves wither and fall, and then in a moment revive as before. On this day (of the Nirvana) the princes of different countries and the religious multitudes from different quarters assemble by thousands and ten thousands unbidden, and bathe the roots with scented water and perfumed milk ; whilst they raise the sounds of music and scatter flowers and perfumes, and whilst the light of day is continued by the burning torches, they offer their religious gifts."

1. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha*, p. 33.

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"After the Nirvana of Tathagata, when Asoka-raja began to reign, he was an unbeliever (a believer in heresy), and he desired to destroy the bequeathed traces of Buddha ; so he raised an army, and himself taking the lead, he came here for the purpose of destroying the tree. He cut through the roots ; the trunk, branches, and leaves were all divided into small bits and heaped up in a pile a few tens of paces to the west of the place. Then he ordered a Brahman who sacrificed to fire to burn them in the discharge of his religious worship. Scarcely had the smoke cleared away, when lo! a double tree burst forth from the flaming fire, and because the leaves and branches were shining like feathers, it was called "ashes bodhi tree". Asoka-raja, seeing the miracle, repented of his crime. He bathed the roots (of the old tree) with perfumed milk to fertilise them, when lo! on the morning of the next day, the tree sprang up as before. The king, seeing the miraculous portent, was overpowered with deep emotion, and himself offered religious gifts, and was so over-joyed that he forgot to return to the palace. The queen, who was an adherent of the heretics, sent secretly a messenger who, after the first division of night, once more cut it down. Asoka-raja in the morning coming again to worship at the tree, seeing only the mutilated trunk, was filled with exceeding grief. With the utmost sincerity he prayed as he worshipped ; he bathed the roots with perfumed milk, and in less than a day again the tree was restored. The king, moved by deep reverence at the prodigy, surrounded the tree with a brick wall above 10 feet, which still remains visible. In late times Sasanka-raja (She-shang-kia), being a believer in heresy, slandered the religion of Buddha, and through envy destroyed the convents and cut down the Bodhi tree, digging it up to the very springs of the earth ; but yet he did not get to the bottom of the roots. Then he burnt it with fire and sprinkled it with the juice of the sugar-cane, desiring to destroy it entirely, and not leave a trace of it behind.

"On the left side of the road, to the north of the place where Buddha walked, is a large stone, on the top of which, as it stands in a great vihara, is a figure of Buddha with his eyes raised and looking up. Here in former times Buddha sat for seven days contemplating the Bodhi tree ; he did not remove his gaze from it during this period, desiring thereby to indicate his grateful feelings towards the tree by so looking at it with fixed eyes." [2]

On conversion to Buddhism, Asoka (273-326 B.C.) abjured violence and became a messenger of good will and peace. For the first time in history we hear of a monarch who encouraged arboriculture and adopted it as a state policy. He encouraged planting of trees in gardens and along roads in the form of avenues. One of the Asoka pillars bears the following inscriptions : "That two designs have been cherished by Piyadasi,—one regarding men, and one relating to animals,—that everywhere wholesome vegetables, roots, and fruit-trees shall be cultivated, and that on the roads wells shall be dug and trees planted, to give enjoyment for both men and animals." [3]

2. Beal, *Chinese Accounts of India*, Vol. III, p. 350.
3. Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, p. 254.

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CHAPTER III

Besnagar

One of the earliest representations of vegetation is the *Kalpa vriksha* of Besnagar or Vidisa (Bhilsa) which has been assigned to third century B.C. now in Calcutta Museum (Fig. 3). It represents the mythical wish fulfilling tree which produced food, drinks, dresses, ornaments and even beautiful maidens.

It has been identified as a banyan tree by Coomaraswamy and he believes that it must have been the capital of the *dhvajastambha* of a temple of Kubera. At the root of the tree are pots, bags of money, a lotus and conch exuding coins. The banyan is also regarded as sacred to Vishnu. Narayana sucking his toe, which is a symbol of eternity, is represented as lying on a banyan leaf, as shown in a number of Rajput paintings. The banyan tree was worshipped for the gift of children during the life-time of the Buddha. "In the *Dummedha Jataka*, a Bodhisattva seeing a crowd of worshippers with bloody offerings at a banyan tree, "praying to the devata who had been reborn in that tree to grant them sons and daughters, honour and wealth, according to their hearts' desire, "himself draws near and behaves as a worshipper (*pūjetvā*), offering perfumes and flowers, lustration (*abhiseka*), circumambulates (*padakkhinain katvā*) and so honours the devata, though actually only with a view to the ultimate substitution of a higher faith for that of the popular tree-cult." [1]

In Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* there is mention of a wish-fulfilling tree in the story of Jimutavahana. Instead of enriching himself, Jimutavahana prayed to the tree for removing the poverty of his land. The story of Jimutavahana and the wish-fulfilling tree is given below.

"There is a great mountain named Himavat, the father of the mother of the world, who is not only the chief of hills, but the spiritual preceptor of Siva, and on that great mountain, the home of the Vidyadharas, dwelt the lord of the Vidyadharas, the King of Jimutaketu. And in his house there was a wishing-tree, which had come down to him from his ancestors, called by a name which expressed its nature, "The Giver of Desires." And one day the King of Jimutaketu approached that wishing-tree in his garden, which was of divine nature, and supplicated it : "We always obtain from you all we desire, therefore give me, O God, who am now childless, a virtuous son." Then the wishing-tree said : "King, there shall be born to thee a son who shall remember his past birth, who shall be a hero in giving, and kind

1. Coomaraswamy, *Yakshas*, Part II, p. 9.

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to all creatures." When he heard that, the king was delighted, and bowed before that tree, and then he went and delighted his queen with the news : accordingly in a short time a son was born to him, and his father called the son Jimutavahana. Then that Jimutavahana, who was of great goodness, grew up step by step with the growth of his innate compassion for all creatures. And in the course of time, when he was made crown prince, he, being full of compassion for the world, said in secret to his father, who was pleased by his attentions : "I know, O father, that in this world all things perish in an instant, but the pure glory of the great alone endures till the end of a kalpa. If it is acquired by benefiting others, what other wealth can be, like it, valued by high-minded men more than life ? And as for prosperity, if it be not used to benefit others, it is like lightning, which for a moment pains the eye and, flickering, disappears somewhere or other. So, if this wishing-tree, which we possess, and which grants all desires, is employed for the benefit of others, we shall have reaped from it all the fruit it can give. So let me take such steps as that by its riches the whole multitude of men in need may be rescued from poverty."

This petition Jimutavahana made to his father, and having obtained his permission, he went and said to that wishing-tree : 'O God, thou always givest us the desired fruit therefore fulfil today this one wish of ours. O my friend, relieve this whole world from its poverty, success to thee, thou art bestowed on the world that desires wealth !' The wishing-tree being addressed in this style by that self-denying one, showered much gold on the earth, and all the people rejoiced ; what other compassionate incarnation of a Bodhisattva except the glorious Jimutavahana would be able to dispose even a wishing-tree in favour of the needy ? For this reason every region of the earth became devoted to Jimutavahana, and his stainless fame was spread on high." [2]

The tree spir it is independent of the tree. The tree is merely its abode and when it is cut the spirit is requested to move elsewhere. That the tree is the abode of a *vana devata* or a tree-god is illustrated by the tale of Brahmadatta.

Long ago, when Brahmadatta was King of Banaras, there came this thought into his mind : "Everywhere in India there are kings whose palaces have many columns ; what if I build a palace supported by only a single column ? Then shall I be the first and singular king among all the kings." So he summoned his craftsmen, and ordered them to build him a magnificent palace supported by a single pillar.

"It shall be done", they said ; and away they went into the forest. There they found a tree, tall and straight, worthy to be the single pillar of such a palace. But the road was too rough and the distance too great for them to take the trunk to the city ; so they returned to the king and sought his advice in the matter. "Somehow or other", he said, "you must bring it, and that without delay". But they answered that neither somehow nor anyhow could it be done. "Then," said the king, "you must select a tree in my own park". There they found a lordly sal tree, straight and beautiful, worshipped alike by the village and the town and the royal family. They told the king about it and he said to them : "Good, go and fell the tree at once."

2. Penzer, *The Ocean of Story, being C. H. Tawney's Translation of Somadeva's Kathasaritsagara*, Vol. II (1924), pp. 138-39

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But they could not do this without making the customary offerings to the tree-god living there, and asking him to depart. So they made offerings of flowers and branches and lighted lamps, and said to the tree : "On the seventh day from this we shall fell the tree, by the king's command. Let any *deva* that may be dwelling in it depart elsewhere, and not unto us be the blame". The god that dwelt in the tree heard what they said, and considered thus : "These craftsmen are agreed to fell my tree. I myself shall perish when my home is destroyed. All the young sal trees around me will be destroyed as well, in which many *devas* of my kith and kin are living. My own death touches me not so nearly as the destruction of my children ; so let me, if possible, save their lives at least".

So at the hour of midnight the tree-god, divinely radiant, entered the king's resplendent chamber, his glory lighting up the whole room. The king was startled, and stammered out : "What being art thou, so god-like and so full of grief ?". The *deva* prince replied : "I am called in thy realm, O King the Lucky-tree ; for sixty thousand years all men have loved and worshipped me. Many a house and many a town, many a palace, too, they made, yet never did me wrong ; honour thou me, even as did they, O King !" But the king answered that such a tree was just what he needed for his palace, a trunk so fine and tall and straight ; and in that palace, said he : "Thou shalt long endure, admired of all who behold thee".

The tree-god answered : "If it must be so, then I have one boon to ask : cut first the top, the middle next, and then the root of me". The king protested that this was a more painful death than to be felled entire. "O forest lord," he said, "what gain is thine thus to be cut limb from limb and piece by piece ?". To which the Lucky-tree replied : "There is a good reason for my wish : my kith and kin have grown up round me, beneath my shade, and I should crush them if I fall entire upon them ; and they would grieve exceedingly."

At this the king was deeply moved, and wondered at the tree-god's noble thought, and lifting his hands in salutation, he said : "O Lucky-tree, O forest lord, as thou wouldst save thy kindred, so shall I spare thee ; so fear nothing."

Then the tree-god gave the king good counsel and went his way ; and the king next day gave generous alms, and ruled as became a king until the time came for his departure to the heavenly world.

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CHAPTER IV

Bharhut

SUNGA C. 184-72 B.C. AND

Bodhgaya

The Stupa of Bharhut was discovered by Cunningham in 1873. Situated in the state of Nagod, now merged in Madhya Pradesh, Bharhut is the site of an old city called Bhaironpur which extended for 12 kos. Cunningham dated the Stupa between 200 and 250 B.C. Later research has assigned 184-72 B.C. as its probable period. The discovery of Bharhut Stupa is a land-mark in the history of India, and it gives us a glimpse of religion, manners, customs, dress, fashions as well as architecture of India during the Sunga period. As it had suffered a good deal of damage on account of the depredations of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages, Cunningham very wisely removed the available pillars and railings to the Museum at Calcutta. Some of the fragments of railings pilfered by the villagers were later on recovered by Brij Mohan Vyas, and he placed them in the Municipal Museum at Allahabad. The hemispherical Stupa, which possibly contained the relics of the Buddha, was made of bricks. It was surrounded by railings and gate-ways, on which sculptures are carved. As the pilgrims went round the Stupa on the procession path they were reminded of the major events in the life of the Buddha, his birth, enlightenment, enunciation of his faith, and his demise.

Apart from the Jatakas or legends of the previous lives of the Buddha, a number of trees are represented in the sculptures. Cunningham identified seven Bodhi trees. Of these pipal (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) is the Bodhi tree of Sakya Muni. The other five trees of the other Buddhas are: banyan or Nyagrodha (*Ficus bengalensis* Linn.), the Bodhi tree of Kasyapa; Gular or Udumbara (*Ficus glomerata* Roxb.), the Bodhi tree of Kanaka Muni; Sirisa (*Albizzia lebbek* (Linn.) Benth.), the Bodhi tree of Krakuchhanda ; Sal (*Shorea robusta* Gaertn. f.), the Bodhi tree of Viswabahu ; Patali tree (*Bignonia suaveolens* Thunb.), the Bodhi tree of Vipaswi. All these trees are shade-giving, and it is not surprising that in a hot country, man expressed his gratitude to them in this manner, and gave them the title of 'Bodhi'. Apart from these six trees, Pundarika or White Lotus, is the symbol of Sikhi. While his remaining identifications are correct what Cunningham identified as Patali tree is in fact the asoka tree.

Pipal, the Bodhi tree of Sakya Muni is very accurately carved on the Prasenajit Pillar. The trunk is growing out of the building and devotees are shown offering flowers to the tree. The

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vidyadharas, the adoring spirits are garlanding the tree and numerous streamers are hanging from the branches (Fig. 4).

There is no representation of the Buddha himself, who is shown by the symbols such as head-dress, three jewels, foot-marks, the wheel, the trees and the Stupa. Even before the Buddha the pipal was regarded as a sacred tree. The soma vessels and the sacred fire-drill were made from pipal wood. "In the *Atharva Veda* it is said that the gods of the third heaven are seated under the *Asvattha* and it may also be the 'tree with fair foliage' of the *Rig Veda* under which Yama and the blessed are said to pass their time". According to Cunningham : "The worship of the Bodhi Tree was specially enjoined by Sakya Muni himself, who directed Ananda to obtain a branch of the tree under which he had obtained Buddhahood, and to plant it in the court of the Vihara at Sravasti ; adding that "he who worships it will receive the same reward as if he worshipped me in person." Such being the recorded origin of the reverence paid to the Pipal Tree of the last Buddha Sakya Sinha, it is not surprising that tree worship was generally popular. In the Divya Avadana it is related that the Bodhi Tree was the favourite object of Asoka's worship ; and in the Bharhut Sculptures we find that the Naga Raja pays

1. Cunningham, *The Stupa of Bharhut*, p. 106

Fig. 4. Prasenjit Pillar—worship of Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

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Fig. 5. Erapatra Nagaraja worships the Bodhi tree of Buddha, Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

Fig. 6. Chhadanta Jataka showing the elephants in front of the banyan tree or Nyagrodha (*Ficus bengalensis*, Linn.) Bharhut. 1 Century B.C.

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Fig. 7. Nyagrodha (*Ficus bengalensis* Linn.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

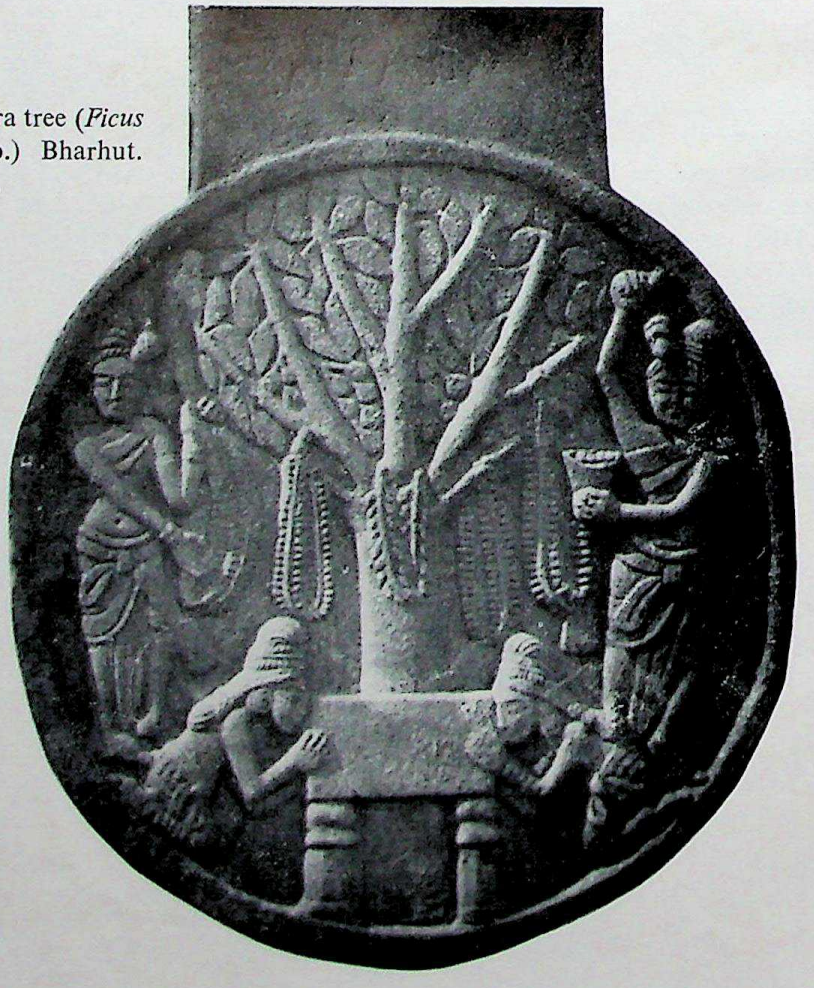

Fig. 8. Udumbara tree (*Ficus glomerata* Roxb.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

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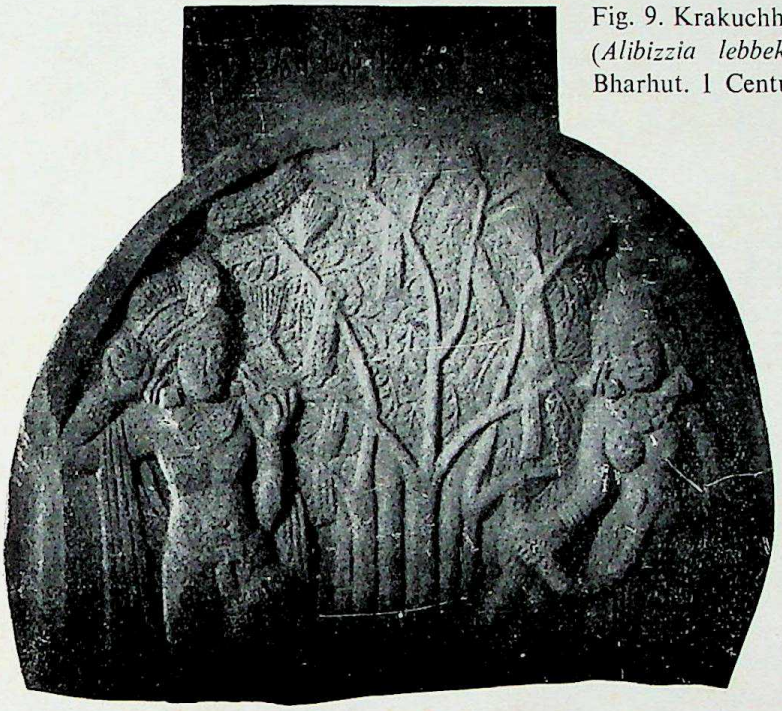

Fig. 9. Krakuchhanda, Sirisa tree (*Alibizzia lebbek* Linn.) Benth. Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

Fig. 10. Viswabahu, Sal tree (*Shorea robusta* Gaertn. f.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

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his adorations to Buddha (Bhagavat) by kneeling down, with joined hands and bowed head, before the Sacred Tree."[1] An interesting sculpture represents Erapatra Naga Raja kneeling at the foot of the Bodhi tree. It is labelled as "Erapatra Naga Raja Bhagavato vandata, or "Erapatra Naga Raja worships (the Bodhi tree) of Buddha." (Fig. 5).

The banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis*) or Nyagrodha, which was the Bodhi Tree of Kasyapa Buddha, is very correctly represented in the Chhadantiya Jataka. It is recognisable by its pendant aerial roots (Fig. 6). It is again shown in another sculpture in which a number of elephants are paying homage to the tree (Fig. 7). The banyan tree is also regarded as an abode of tree goddesses. In the story of Somaprabha in Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* a tree-goddess incarnated herself as a daughter of a merchant named Dharmagupta of Pataliputra. The moment she was born the chamber was illuminated with her beauty, and she got up and sat down. Dharmagupta was terrified to see the girl and asked her about her identity. She told him not to give her in marriage to anyone. Ultimately she was married to one Guhachandra who led a miserable life living with a goddess who would not allow him to come near her. She used to disappear every evening, and one day Guhachandra followed her with a Brahmin. What he saw is narrated as follows in the *Kathasaritsagara*. "Thereupon Guhachandra saw before him a Nyagrodha tree of wide extent, beautiful with its shady stem, and under it he heard a heavenly sound of singing, sweet with strains floating on the air, accompanied with the music of the lyre and the flute. And on the trunk of the tree he saw a heavenly maiden, like his wife in appearance, seated on a splendid throne, eclipsing by her beauty the moonbeam, fanned with white chowries, like the goddess presiding over the treasure of all the moon's beauty. And then Guhachandra saw his wife ascend that very tree and sit down beside that lady, occupying half of her throne. While he was contemplating those two heavenly maidens of equal beauty sitting together, it seemed to him as if that night were lighted by three moons."[2]

Gular, also known as Udumbara (*Ficus glomerata*) is very accurately shown in one of the sculptures. The tree is recognisable by its habit of cauliflory, i.e. the emergence of fruit from the stem and branches. Udumbara tree was the Bodhi tree of Kanaka Muni and is shown here being worshipped by devotees one of whom is hanging a garland on its branches, another making an offering, and two who appear to be women, are bowing before it (Fig. 8).

Sirisa (*Albizzia lebbek* Linn.), Benth. the Bodhi tree of Krakuchhanda, is also fairly clearly shown in one of the sculptures (Fig. 9).

Sal (*Shorea robusta* Gaertn. f.) is the Bodhi tree of Viswabahu. It is recognised by its straight columnar stem. It is also one of the trees associated with the birth of the Buddha. It is shown as being worshipped by devotees in Fig. 10".

The mango (*Mangifera indica* Linn.) frequently occurs among the sculptures of Bharhut. In the relief showing presentation of Jetavana monastery, the holy mango tree, the stone of which was planted by Ananda according to the Buddha's instructions is shown. "According to the Burmese account, a gardener gave him, in present, a large mango fruit. Ananda prepared the fruit and Buddha ate it. When this was done, the stone was handed to Ananda, with an injunction to plant it in a place prepared to receive it. When planted, Buddha washed

1. *Cunningham, The Stupa of Bharhut*, p. 107
2. Penzer, *The Ocean of Story, being C. H. Tawney's Translation of Somadeva's Kathasaritsagara*, Vol. II (1924), pp. 42-43.

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his hands over it, and on a sudden there sprung up a beautiful white mango tree, fifty cubits high, with large branches loaded with blossoms and fruit. To prevent its being destroyed, a guard was set near it, by the king's order."[3] On the right the ground of the monastery is being covered with gold pieces and the mango tree is being watered. On the left a man is shown tasting its fruit (Fig. 11).

The tala tree (*Borassus flabellifer* Linn.) the well-known palmyra palm, is depicted in one of the medallions (Fig. 12). It is a common tree in the south and eastern India, and the accuracy with which it is carved shows that the sculptors were well-acquainted with it. The tree described as *Bignonia suaveolens* or the Patali by Cunningham is obviously an asoka tree (*Saraca indica*). *Bignonia suaveolens*, now called *Stereospermum suaveolens*, is a tall deciduous tree. The flowers are dark-purple and are borne in trichotomous panicles, and the corolla is tubular with two lips as shown in Fig. 15. A comparison of the leaves and flowers with the tree shown in Fig. 13 indicates that it has been wrongly identified. Cunningham himself seems to be uncertain about its identity. "The tree is in flower, but as the flower is represented in full front view, the peculiar shape which gave it the name of Patali, or the "Trumpet-flower", is not seen",[4] he observes. Had he seen an asoka tree covered with blossoms, he would not have made this mistake. The asoka tree is associated with the birth of the Buddha, and it is on account of this fact that it is represented as being worshipped by the devotees.

The asoka tree is again shown in association with a Yakshi in figure 14. The Yakshas were the subjects of Kubera, the god of wealth, who is also regarded as the guardian of the north quarter of Mount Meru. The four gates of the Stupa are shown as being guarded by Yakshas, who are mild-looking men clad in *dhotis* and wearing turbans. Chulakoka Yakshi is shown with one hand raised touching the flower-covered branches of the asoka and her left hand and left leg twined around the trunk of the tree. This is the famous *dohada* pose when a beautiful maiden awakens asoka flowers by the touch of her foot. The buds of the asoka suddenly open and this characteristic has possibly given rise to the poetic fancy of its flowering when kicked by a beautiful young woman. Its bark is supposed to have medicinal properties and is given to women for menstrual ailments. In this sculpture we see a very realistic representation of the asoka tree which is carved with sensitive feeling.

The tree shown in Fig. 16 of Chanda Yakshini is *Mesua ferrea* Linn. popularly known as Nagkesar or Naga tree. It has four petals enclosing a bunch of golden stamens. Compare it with the photograph of a flowering branch of *Mesua ferrea* in Fig. 17. Both the shape of flowers and leaves show remarkable resemblance.

Coomaraswamy regards the Yakshis or Vrikshakas as auspicious emblems of vegetative fertility. These tree-goddesses with their broad pelvis and bulging busts are no doubt symbols of the fecundity of nature. The famous *salabhanjika* pose in which a woman is shown plucking flowers of sal tree derives from the nativity legend of the Buddha in the Lumbini garden where Mayadevi, supported by the sal tree, stretching her arm to catch the flowers, delivers the holy child. This seems to have provided the basis for the woman and tree motifs which are so frequently seen in the Buddhist sculptures of Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati and Mathura. From

3. Cunningham, *The Stupa of Bharhut*, p. 87.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

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Fig. 11. Presentation of Jetavana monastery, Mango tree (*Mangifera indica* Linn.) is shown. Bharhut. I Century B. C.

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Fig. 12. Tala tree (*Borassus flabellifer* Linn.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

Fig. 13. Patali tree. Described as *Bingonia suaveolens* Thunb. in fact it is Asoka tree. Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

Fig. 14. Chulakoka Yakshi holding a branch of the Asoka tree (*Saraca indica* Linn.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

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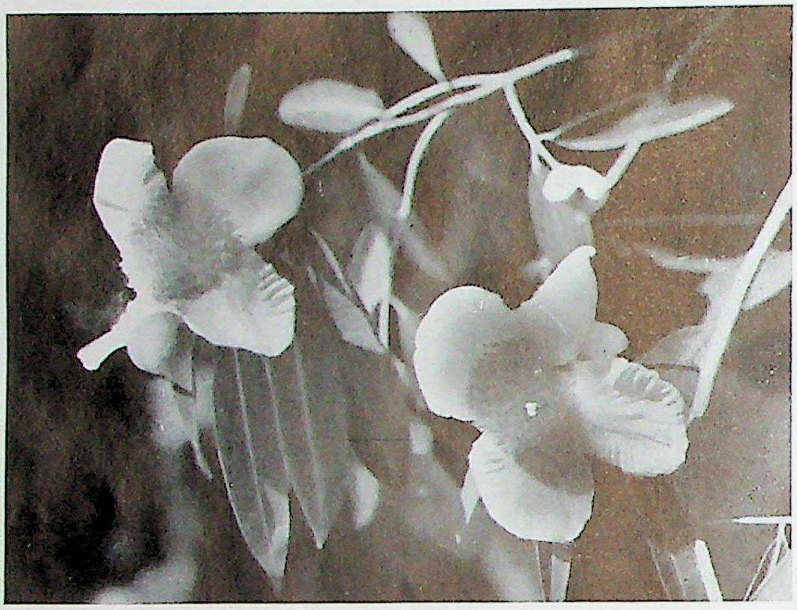

Fig. 17. A flowering branch of Nag-kesar (*Mesua ferrea* Linn.).

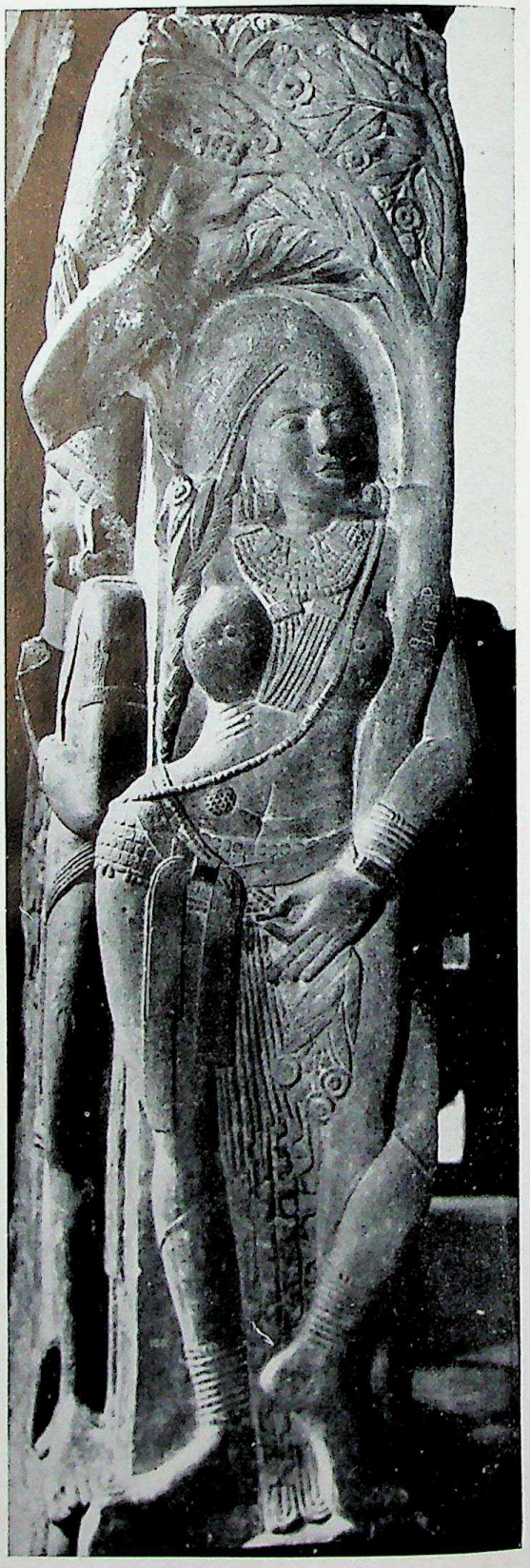

Fig. 16. Chanda Yakshini with the Nag-kesar tree (*Mesua ferrea* Linn.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

Fig. 15. A flowering branch of the Patali or the Trumpet-flower (*Stereospermum suaveolens* DC) or *Bignonia suaveolens*. Note how different it is from the tree in Fig. 13.

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Fig. 18. Elephants adoring Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

its association with the birth of the Buddha, the Vrikshaka motif became a symbol of fertility and women prayed to it for gifts of children. "The Mahabharata also speaks of dryads (Vrikshaka and Varikshi) as 'goddesses born in trees, to be worshipped by those desiring

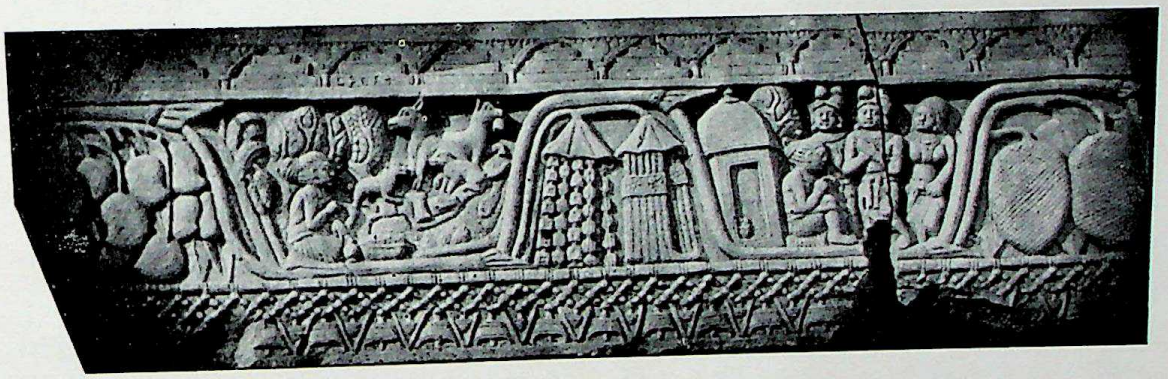

Fig. 19. Kalpa-lata. Bharhut. 1 Century B. C.

children' "[5] states Coomaraswamy. In the ancient city of Sravasti, *Salabhanjika* festival was celebrated with great zeal when the sal trees flowered. The sal trees in full blossom were worshipped for offspring.

In the Jatakas Tree-spirits play a great part, being worshipped with perfumes, flowers, and food. They dwell in many kinds of trees, but the banyan, sal and the silk-cotton trees are their particular favourites. The tree is worshipped not for its own sake, but because it is the home of the spirit. If the spirit leaves the tree, the tree withers and dies, and the spirit is immortal.

The pose of a woman stretching her arm to catch the flowers of a tree is beautiful. It display to best advantage the rounded contours of a lovely woman. It provided the sculptors an opportunity to portray female beauty with skill and feeling.The technique is that of a skilleds wood-carver, and the treatment is naturalistic. The delicate beauty of these nymphs and dryads has a charm of its own which cannot be matched by the other sculptures of female figure in the Buddhist-Hindu art. In these Vrikshakas the tree in blossom lends charm to

5. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*. p. 64.

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the beautiful female figure. Here we see the beauty of vegetation combined with the beauty of woman, and the total result is entrancing indeed.

Apart from woman and tree figures there are a number of plant motifs in Bharhut sculpture. The greatest favourite of the sculptors was the lotus which they carved to perfection. The medallions are filled with lotus flowers, apart from elephants, bulls, monkeys, crocodiles and peacocks. In an architrave exquisitely carved elephants are shown offering lotus buds and flowers to the Bodhi tree (Fig. 18). The *purna kumbha*, the vessel of good fortune, is seen on a pillar in the form of a vase filled with lotus buds and flowers. Apart from natural vegetation there are fantastic plant motifs such as the lotus creepers (*padma-lata*) and the wish-fulfilling creepers (*kalpa-lata*). To the wish-fulfilling creepers are attached mangoes, jack-fruits as well as ornaments (Fig. 19). Lotus creepers are also seen issuing from the navel of dwarfs.

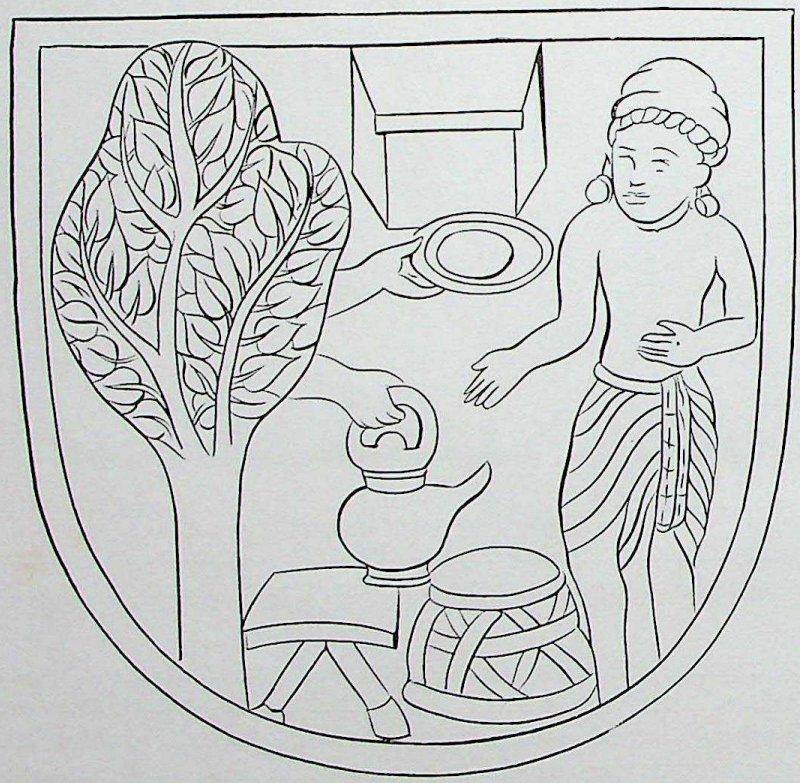

FIG. 19A *Vriksha devata* offering food and drink to a way-farer.
BODHGAYA C 100 B. C.

BODHGAYA

The railing at Bodhgaya has been dated C.100 B.C. It enclosed the space where the Buddha walked after his great experience. The sculptures on the railing are in Bharhut style. The woman and tree motif is represented here also.

On one of the panels a *Vriksha devata* is shown offering food and drink to a way-farer. The tree in which the tree-god is concealed resembles the pipal. Only the projecting hands of the tree-god can be seen, one holding a plate with a *chapatti* and another a vessel containing water (Fig. 19-A). Similar theme of *Vana devata* offering food and drink to a passer-by is represented in the sculpture at Bharhut and Mathura.

Two fan-palm capitals were discovered from Pawaya in Gwalior, which have been assigned to the second half of the first century B.C. The palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) is carved with intense realism in one of these (Fig. 20.) Not only the fan-shaped leaves, but the rounded fruit also are shown. In fact it is the best representation of this tree in Buddhist Hindu sculpture.

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Fig. 20. Palmyra capital from Pawaya (*Borassus flabellifer* Linn.) Archaeological Museum, Gwalior. 1 Century B. C.

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CHAPTER V

Sanchi and Bhaja

SATAVAHANA C. 200 B.C.—200 A.D.

The Stupa of Sanchi was described by Fergusson in 1873. He was so much impressed by the reliefs on the toranas, in which a number of trees are shown being worshipped, that he gave the title of 'Tree and Serpent worship' to his monograph.

Sanchi is about 5½ miles from Bhilsa, the modern successor of the ancient town of Vidisa. Vidisa was the junction of two great trade routes, one of which ran west to east from the busy sea-ports of the western coast of India through Ujjain, Kausambi and Benares to Pataliputra and the other south to north-west from Pratisthana, the Andhra capital to Sravasti. Vidisa was the home of Devi, the wife of Asoka. The famous Stupa in which the remains of the Buddha were enshrined was built by Asoka in 225 B.C.

As Sir John Marshall remarks "Asoka himself founded the Sangharama and built this Stupa where not only because Vidisa was one of the greatest cities of his empire, but because he wished to honour it as the birth-place of the beautiful Devi and a spot invested with specially happy memories for himself."[1] The Stupa was made of bricks and about the middle of 2nd century B.C., during the reign of Sunga king Agnimitra, it was encased in stone and the procession path was paved with stones. The Stupa was surrounded by a balustrade which reminds one of wooden palisades and enclosures. The balustrade was pierced by four gate-ways or toranas which are richly carved. The toranas of Stupa numbers 1 and 3 which are covered with sculpture reliefs were added in the Andhra period from 72-25 B.C. The stones of the procession path, balustrade, and the gate-ways are gifts from devotees. Each gate-way is composed of two square pillars surmounted by capitals supported by a structure of three architraves with volute ends.

As in Bharhut there are a number of reliefs showing the worship of the Bodhi tree (pipal). At the base of a pillar we see the pipal tree very realistically carved, surrounded by devotees and gandharvas (Fig. 21).

1. Marshall, *The Monuments of Sanchi.*

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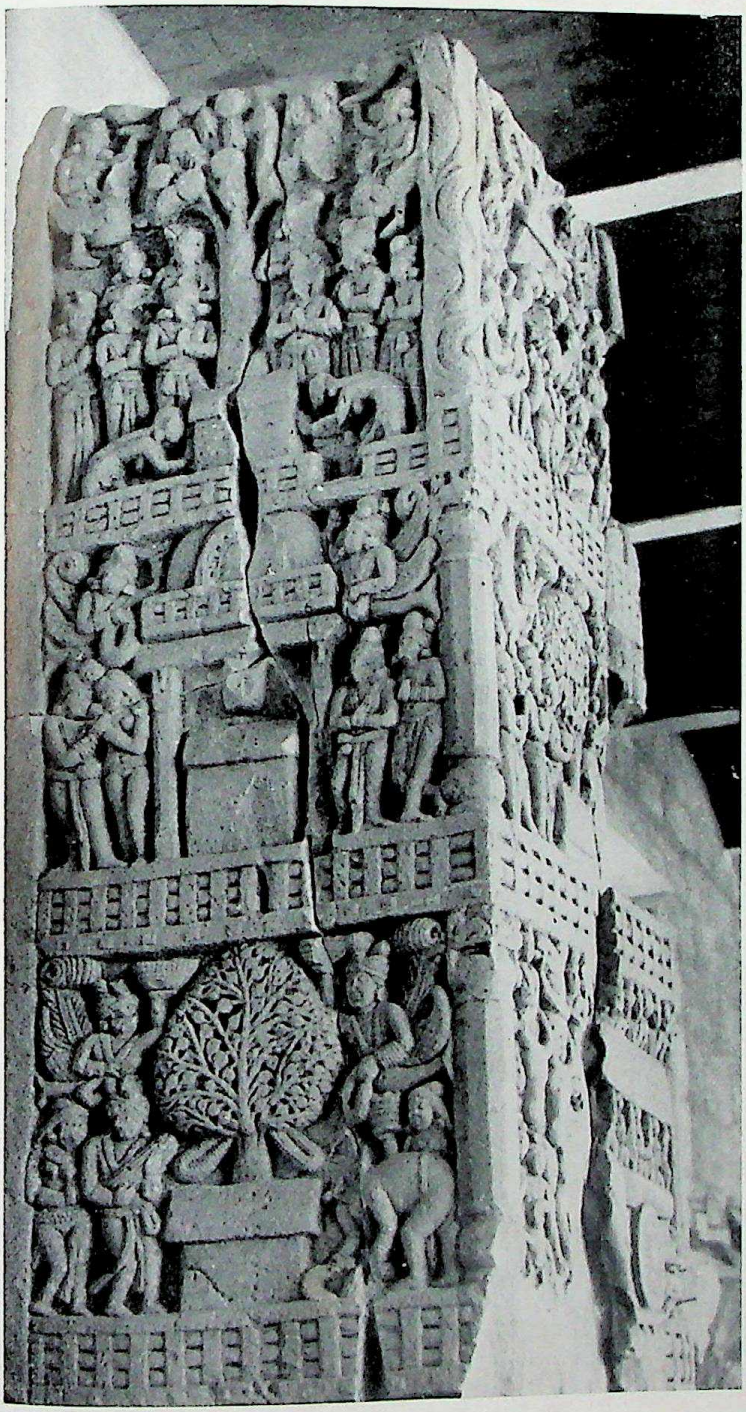

Fig. 21. A sculpture from Sanchi showing a Jataka scene. Worship of Pipal tree. (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) 1 Century A.D.

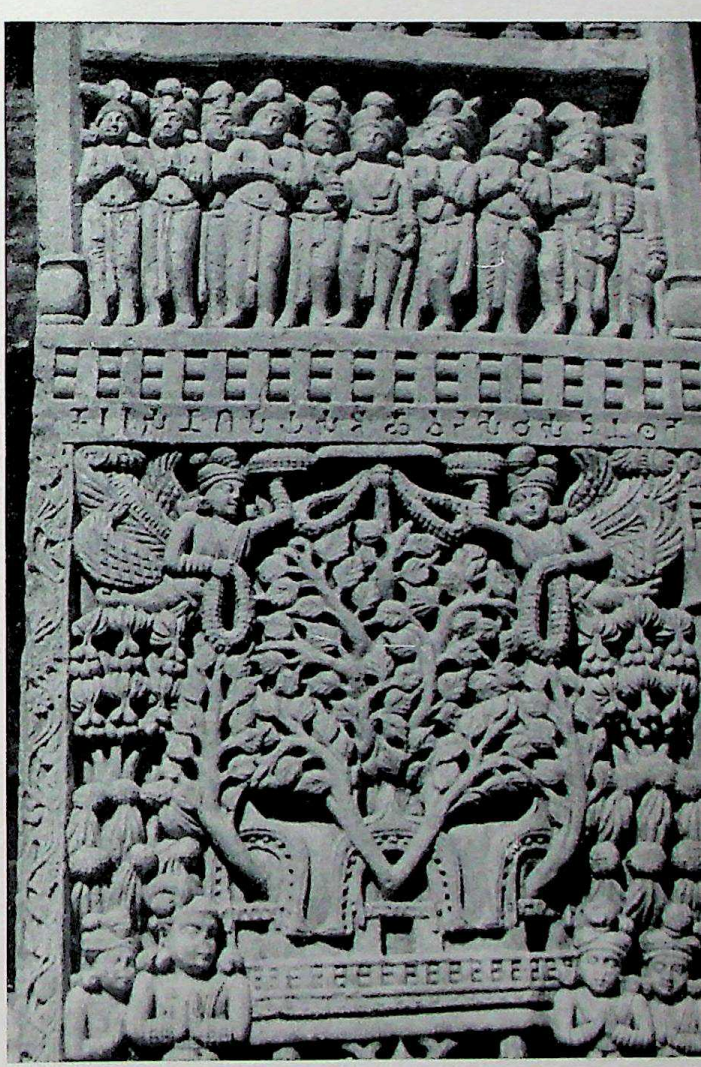

Fig. 22. A panel from the east gateway of Sanchi showing worship of Pipal tree. (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) 1 Century A.D.

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There is another panel on the east gate-way showing the worship of the pipal. Branches of the pipal are projecting out of the windows of a building. At the sides branches of mangoes and flowering asoka are shown. (Fig. 22).

There is another sculpture on the western pillar of the northern gate illustrating the Jataka 'offering of honey by monkeys at Vaisali'. In this the leaves of pipal, the Bodhi tree of Sakya Muni, are accurately drawn. The tree is garlanded and in the foreground are monkeys holding vessels containing honey, standing almost in a human attitude. In a corner are flowering branches of asoka. Between the Bodhi tree and the asoka are euphorbias which figure in

Fig. 23. Offer of honey by monkeys at Vaisali, plants shown are *Ficus religiosa*, *Euphorbia* sp. and *Saraca indica*. Stupa 1, North Gate, Sanchi. 1 Century A.D.

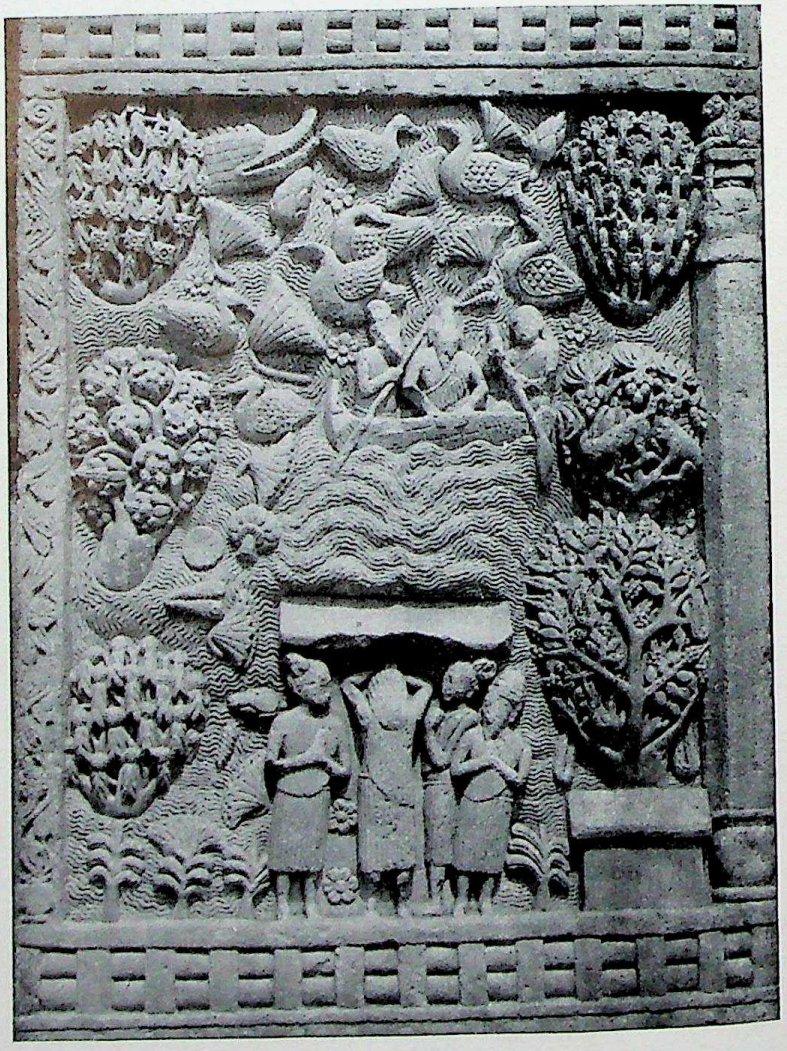

Fig. 24. Miracle of walking over water. Plants shown are *Euphorbia sp.* mango, plantains, lotuses, and *Saraca indica* Stupa 1, East Gate, Sanchi. 1 Century A.D.

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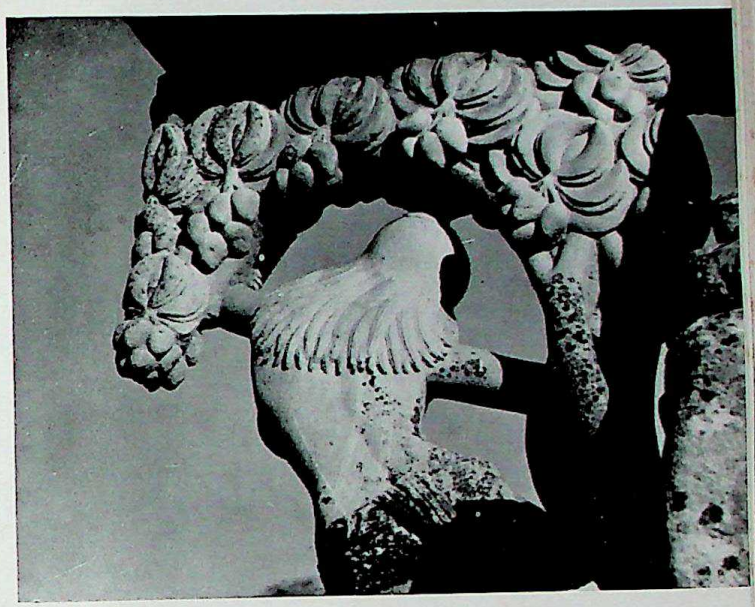

Fig. 25. Yakshi under Mango tree Stupa 1, East Gate, Sanchi. 1 Century A.D.

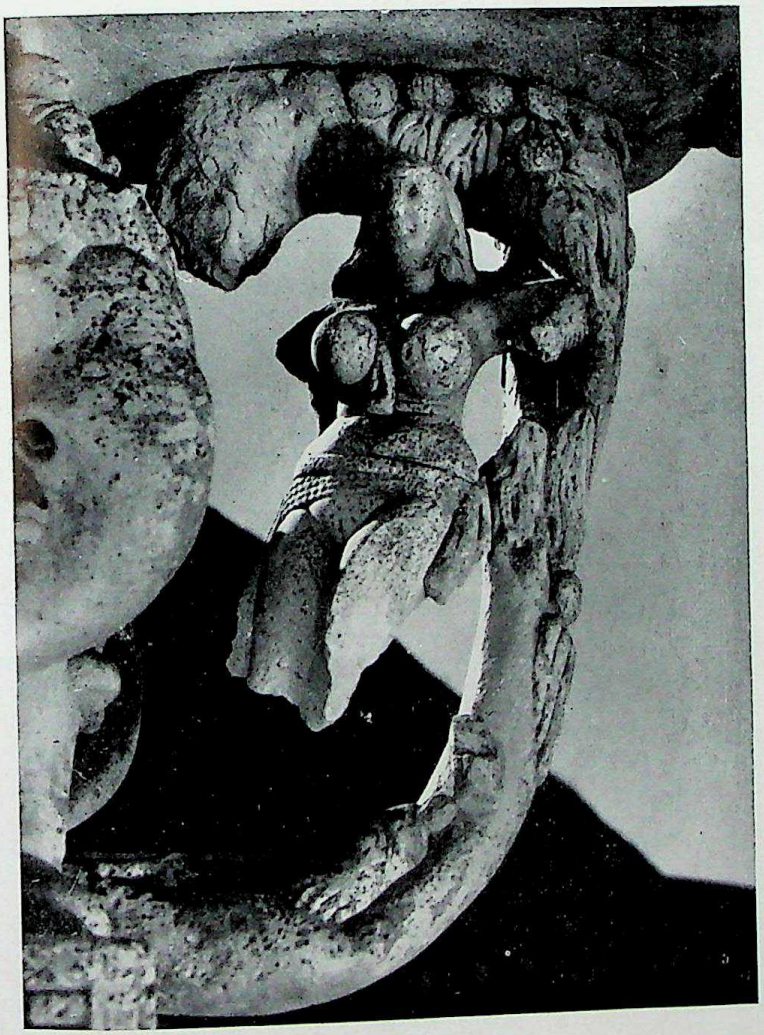

Fig. 27. Yakshi under Asoka tree (*Saraca indica* Linn.) Stupa 1, North Gate, Sanchi. 1 Century A.D.

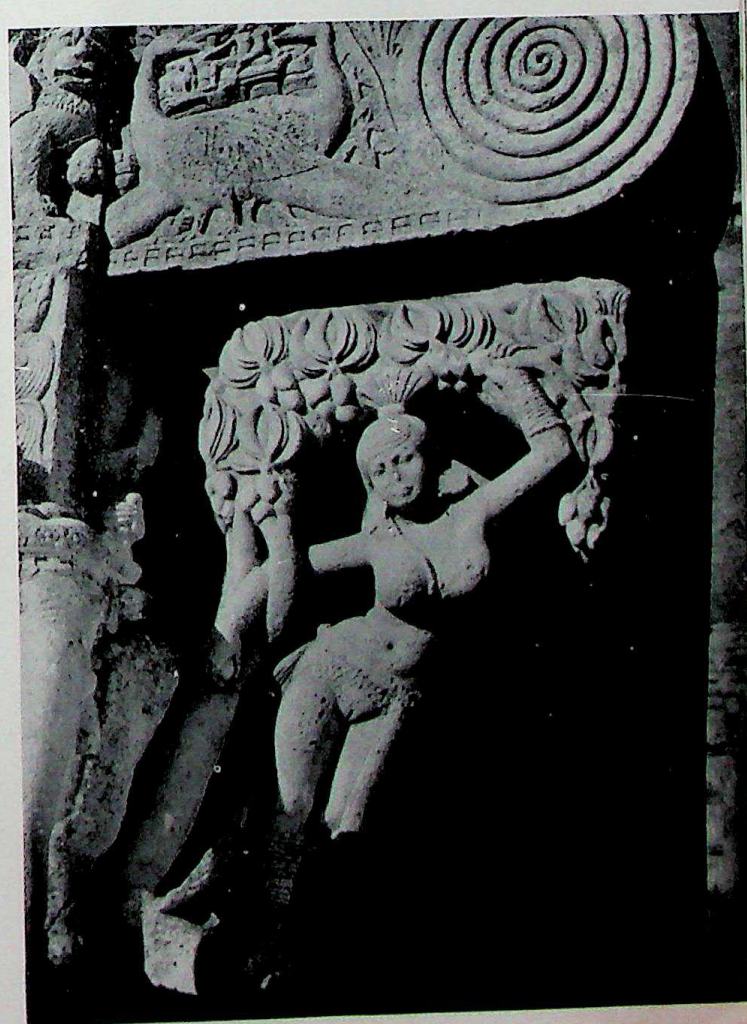

Fig. 26. Yakshi under Mango tree (*Mangifera indica* Linn.) Stupa 1, East Gate, Sanchi. 1 Century A.D.

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Fig. 28. A Medallion—Lakshmi surrounded by lotuses Stupa II, Sanchi. 2 Century B. C.

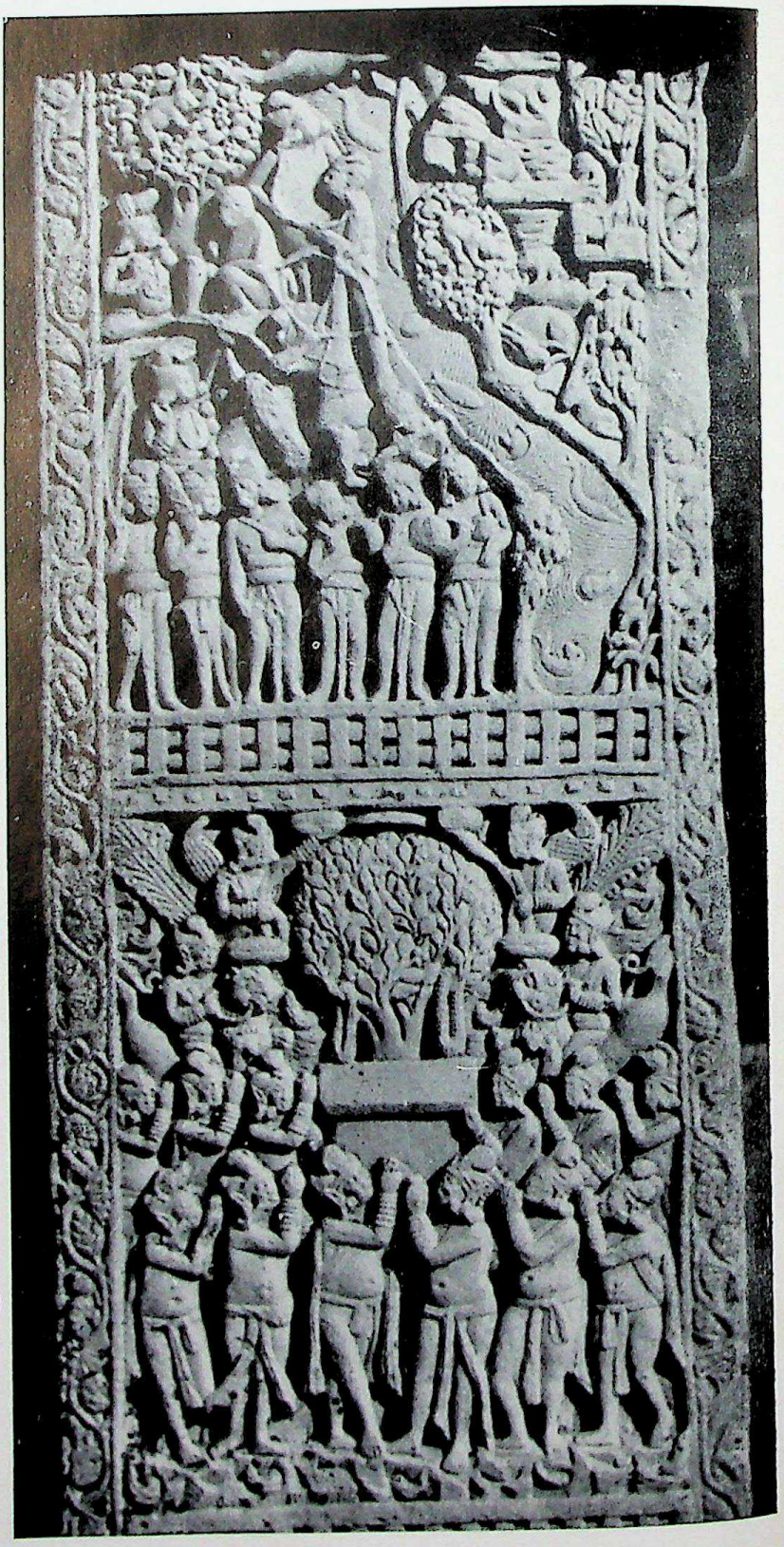

Fig. 29. Worship of Bodhi tree (*Ficus glomerata* Roxb.) Stupa 1, West Gate, Sanchi. 1 Century A. D.

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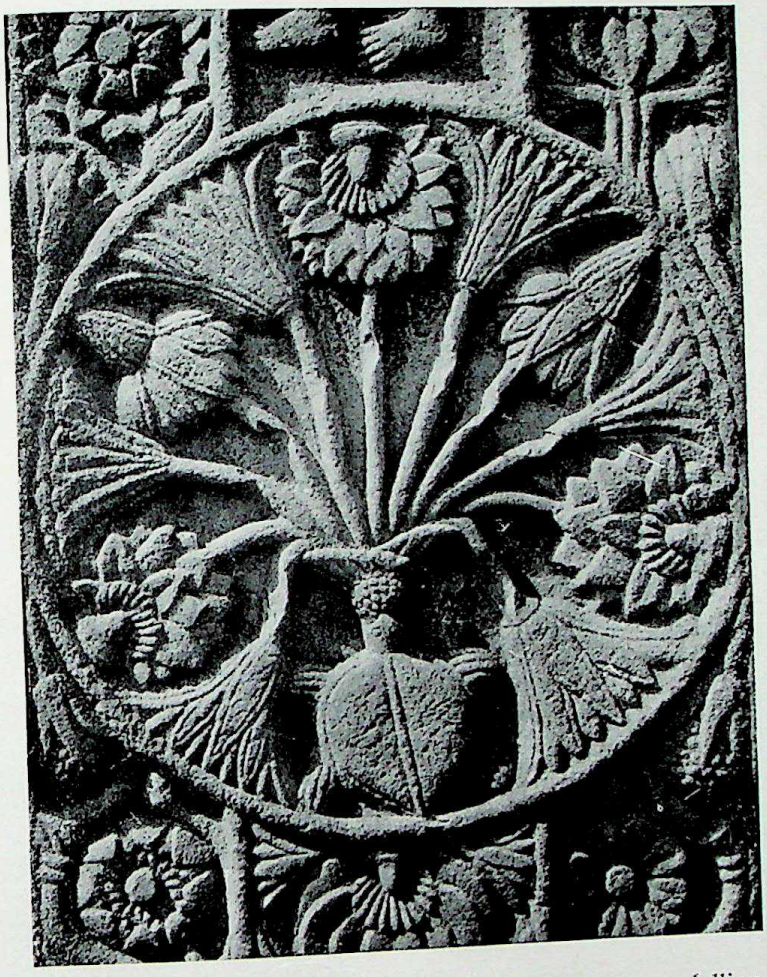

Fig. 30. Tortoise with lotus stalk in its mouth, a medallion, Stupa II, Sanchi. 2 Century B. C.

other sculptures as well (Fig. 23). *Euphorbia nivulia*, with cylindrical trunks capped by strap-like leaves is found in abundance covering the low hills around Sanchi.

In Fig. 24 is shown the miracle of walking over water from the eastern gate of Stupa No. 1 at Sanchi. The lake is covered with lotuses and floating swans. The hermits stand surrounded by plantains. To their left are flowering asoka branches. To the right is Udumbara (*Ficus glomerata*), the Bodhi tree of Kanaka Muni. Higher up is a mango tree laden with fruit and still higher up is a clump of euphorbias. The tree opposite possibly shows the naga pushpa or *Michelia champaka* of Maitreya, the Buddha to come. Fig. 29, which illustrates the Maha-kapi Jataka, also shows the worship of Udumbara (*Ficus glomerata*).

Acting as supports to the projecting ends of the lowest architraves in the gate-way are graceful *vrikshakas* or wood nymphs. On the front of the eastern gate-way (north-end) is a graceful

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female figure, carved in a naturalistic manner. Swaying gracefully from the branch of the tree, the *vrikshaka* is singularly beautiful. "Holding with both hands to the arching bough of a mango-tree, the *salabhanjika* 'curves the woodbine of her body' in an attitude which brings out her breasts 'like urns of gold'. Her locks spread out over her back are brought up on the crown of her head into a curious topknot, which may be compared to the coiffure of the female servants and jungle-dwellers. Her transparent dhoti is only betrayed by the pleated folds falling at the sides and drawn up at the back between the legs. Her big ear-rings are broken, but the bangles which load her fore-arms almost upto the elbow and her legs almost to the knees, her bead necklace and her girdle of trinkets lend themselves to detailed study. The type presents a pleasing compromise between the court lady and the woman of the woods." [2] (Fig. 26).

Fig. 27 shows a *vrikshaka* under a flowering asoka tree (*Saraca indica*). This tree has been wrongly identified by Marshall and Foucher as bignonia. They observe : "The tree is a bignonia, whose flowers are, as usual, represented facing front, so that one cannot see the 'trumpet' shape to which they owe their name in Sanskrit and English." [3] It seems this wrong identification has been made following Cunningham. We have already mentioned in the account of Bharhut Stupa that it cannot be *Bignonia suaveolens*, but is clearly a flowering asoka tree (*Saraca indica*). The motif of flowering asoka is very frequently shown in the sculptures of Sanchi. The lower portion of this sculpture is broken. Quite obviously it shows the famous *dohada* motif, e.g. a young maiden awakening the asoka flowers.

Lotus flowers, buds and leaves are carved in a number of medallions. Out of these the most attractive is the one showing Sri Lakshmi, or Padma, the lotus-goddess of wealth and prosperity surrounded by lotuses (Fig. 28). A lotus rhizome bearing leaves and flowers is a common form of decoration in Sanchi sculpture. The lotus is a symbol of the waters which support all life. Coomaraswamy believes that deities like Sri and Kubera are of the Yaksha type, vegetation spirits bestowing upon their devotees fertility and wealth. There are a number of fantastic sculptures with lotus creepers issuing from the mouths and navels of dwarfs and animals. In Fig. 30 we see flowering branches issuing from the mouth of a tortoise.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 44. Marshall, *The Monuments of Sanchi*, p. 44.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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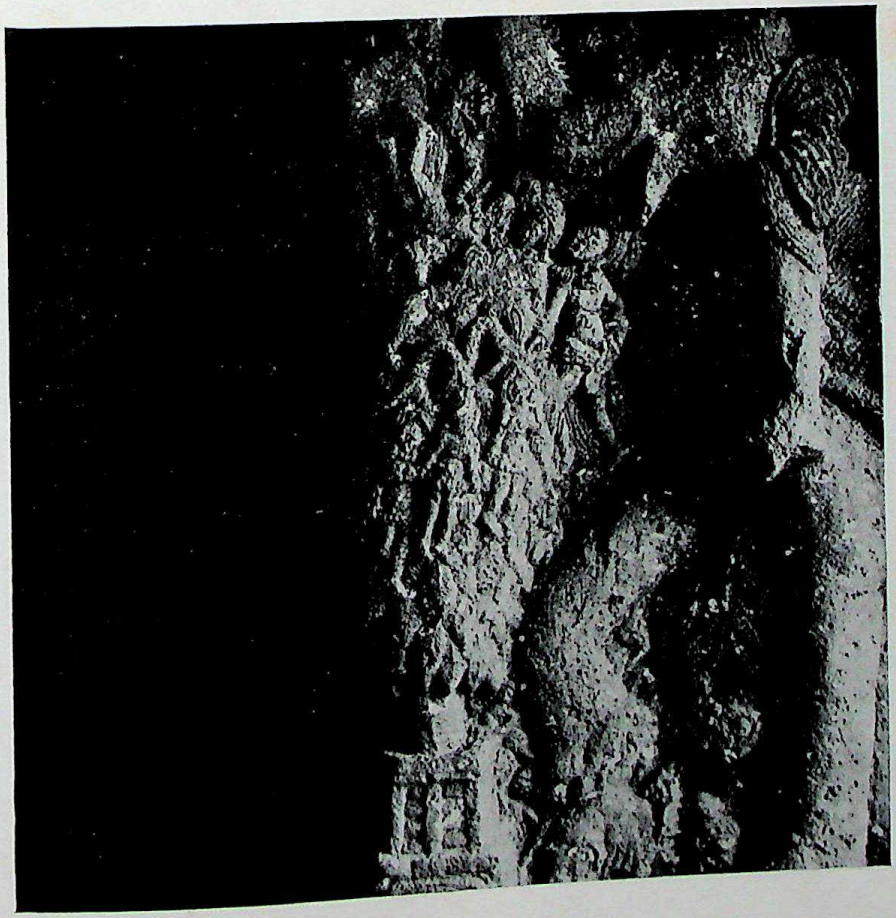
Bhaja

C. 200 B.C.—200 A.D.

The Vihara at Bhaja near the hill-station of Khandala in Western Ghats in Maharashtra State is the oldest in respect of its sculptures. In front of the figures of Indra riding an elephant is a tree with its base surrounded by railings. From the tree a number of female figures are suspended (Fig. 31). Coomaraswamy regards this as a representation of human sacrifice.

Fig. 31. A tree bearing damsels, Bhaja. 1 Century B.C.



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CHAPTER VI

Mathura

KUSHAN C. 78-200 A.D.

Among Mathura sculptures, apart from graceful statues of the Buddha and Jaina Tirthankaras, exquisitely carved bracket figures of Woman and Tree (*Salabhanjika*) motif were discovered. The Kushan kings Kanishka, Huvishka and Vasudeva had their capital at Parsupura (Peshawar). They also ruled over Mathura. These sculptures are carved out of spotted red sand-stone similar to that found in the quarries of Tantpore and Fatehpore Sikri in Agra district. These bracket figures were described by Vincent Smith (1901) in a monograph. His Victorian sense of morality was shocked by the nakedness of the bracket figures. Describing them he writes : "These figures are indecently naked and could not be Buddhist. With the exception of one small figure in an obscene attitude, all these naked figures are female and seem to be intended for dancing girls. The costume, if such it may be called, consists solely of jewellery and an ornamental girdle round the hips. The trees under which the women stand are in each case of a distinct kind. I cannot venture to identify the trees." [1]

In the catalogue of the Mathura Museum compiled by Dr. Vogel in 1910 asoka and kadamba trees are mentioned by name for the first time. The most popular motif with the Mathura sculptors were leaves and flowers of asoka (*Saraca indica* Linn.). We find numerous sculptures in Mathura and Lucknow museums where asoka tree is shown associated with female figures. These are not dancing girls, but *Vriksha devatas*, symbols of fertility, who were worshipped for gifts of children by childless women. In the Bacchanalian groups discovered from villages Moholi and Palikhera we find the drooping branches of asoka with its unmistakable leaves and also an inflorescence. On a slab with the figures of a couple feeding a parrot we find the blossoming branch of asoka on the lower panel. On another fragment we see a squirrel climbing an asoka tree (Fig. 33). On a railing pillar we see a woman standing under a flowering asoka tree. Among these 'rather immodest females' as Vincent Smith calls them we find a beautiful woman with a happy face standing cross-legged on a crouching dwarf, fastening a lotus garland on her head. Behind her we see an exquisitely carved branch of *Saraca indica* with its characteristic lanceolate leaves and Ixora-like inflorescence which are so true to nature. (Fig. 32).

In another we see a woman gathering asoka flowers. The female figures are charmingly

1. Smith, *The Jain Stupa and Antiquities of Mathura.*

Fig. 32. Woman under an Asoka tree. Kushan Mathura. 2 Century A.D.

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Fig. 33. Squirrel climbing an Asoka tree, Kushan Mathura. 2 Century A.D.

Fig. 34. Painting of a flowering branch of the Asoka tree (*Saraca indica* Linn).

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natural and full of feminine grace. Their opulence of form conforms with the Hindu ideal of female beauty.

Kalidasa describes the asoka tree in some of his plays, and in his *Ritusamhara* he gives charming descriptions of most of our indigenous beautiful trees which flower from month to month. In his description of spring, he describes the mango tree bent with clusters of coppery red leaves, and their branches covered with light yellow fragrant blossoms shaken by the March breezes, which kindle the flame of love in the hearts of women. He describes the asoka trees with their graceful drooping young leaves hanging like tassels of silk, covered with coral red blossoms which make the hearts of young women *sasoka* (sorrowful).

There was a favourite festival celebrated in spring known as '*asoka-pushpaprachayika*' the gathering of asoka flowers, when young women collected asoka flowers, decked themselves

Fig. 35. Woman under *Michelia champaca* Linn., Kushan Mathura. 2 Century A.D.

Fig. 36. Woman under Asoka tree (*Saraca indica* Linn.) Kushan Mathura. 2 Century A.D.

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in gorgeous clothes and inserted orange-scarlet bunches of its flowers in the mops of their glossy jet-black hair. The asoka tree is associated with young and beautiful women, and a tree was supposed to flower only when its roots were pressed by the foot of a charming young girl. Kalidasa has most charmingly portrayed the scene of awakening of asoka flowers in his play *Malavikagnimitra*. *Malavika*, the heroine who is in love with Raja Agnimitra, performs a dance under an asoka tree. On seeing the tree she says, "So this is the asoka which wants the touch of my feet. It has not yet decorated itself with flowers". She dances, and hits the asoka with her left foot and remarks with maidenly pride, "This asoka would be too mean if it does not flower even now." No wonder the asoka was held in such high esteem, that no garden was regarded complete without it in those joyful days of India.

Apart from asoka we find four other trees depicted in these sculptures. In one of these we see a woman under a kadamba tree (*Anthocephalus indicus*, Rich.) displaying sword dance and touching its ball-like flowers. The broad ovate leaves with conspicuously marked venation and globose inflorescence are prominent characters of *Anthocephalus indicus* which have been faithfully carved by the sculptor (Fig. 37).

In the Mahabharata we find reference to kadamba tree in Kamyak forest which existed south-west of Delhi and it is likely that the existing kadamba forests in Mathura and Bharatpore are remnants of this ancient Kamyak forest. The king of Sindh is passing through Kamyak forest on his way to Salva country and his messenger thus addresses Draupadi, the spouse of Pandavas, "Who art thou that, bending down the branch of the kadamba tree, shinest lonely in the hermitage, sparkling alike, at night, a flame of fire shaken by the breeze, oh well-browed one ! Exceedingly art thou vested with beauty, yet nothing fearest thou here in the forest."[2] Kadamba was also intimately associated with Krishna, and it must have been a common tree in the age of Mahabharata. Kadamba dynasty of South India (4th to 11th century A.D.) derives its name from Kadamba tree.

The third unidentified tree which we find appears to be champak (*Michelia champaca*, Linn.) and forms a background to a beautiful female figure wearing a peculiar head-dress (Fig. 35) the leaves of Champak taper to a long point. Segments of the perianth in three series, oblong sepals and the stalked gynophore with numerous carpels, are characters of *Michelia champaca*, Linn. a member of the family Magnoliaceae. The cone-like terminal structures appear to be the compound fruit of *Michelia champaca* rather than a flower.

The fourth tree with leaves like asoka and comparatively smaller axillary flowers, which we find in a sculpture behind a woman treading over a dwarf resembles *Mesua ferrea*, Linn. (Fig. 41) the well-known Nagkesar or Naga tree of Bengal and Assam. Its linear-lanceolate acuminate drooping opposite leaves with short peduncles and axillary solitary flowers resemble those of *Mesua ferrea* rather than of any other Indian tree. *Mesua ferrea* with its strikingly beautiful leaves and highly fragrant flowers must have been as much popular in ancient India, as it is now in Bengal and Assam.

Ashvaghosha, the spiritual preceptor of Kanishka, mentions a number of beautiful trees in

2. Vogel, *Catalogue of the Archaeological Museum, Mathura.*, p. 44.

Fig. 37. Woman under a Kadamba tree, Kushinagar, 2nd Cent. A.D.

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Fig. 38. Painting of Kadamba (*Anthocephalus indicus* Rich).

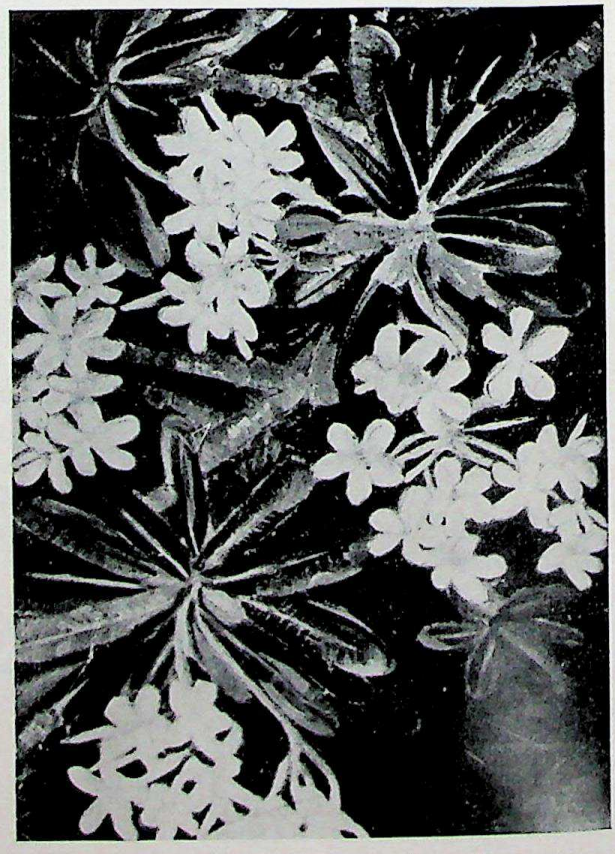

Fig. 39. Painting of a flowering branch of *Plumeria alba*.

Fig. 40. Woman under a Champa tree (*Plumeria alba*), Kushan Mathura. 2 Century A.D.

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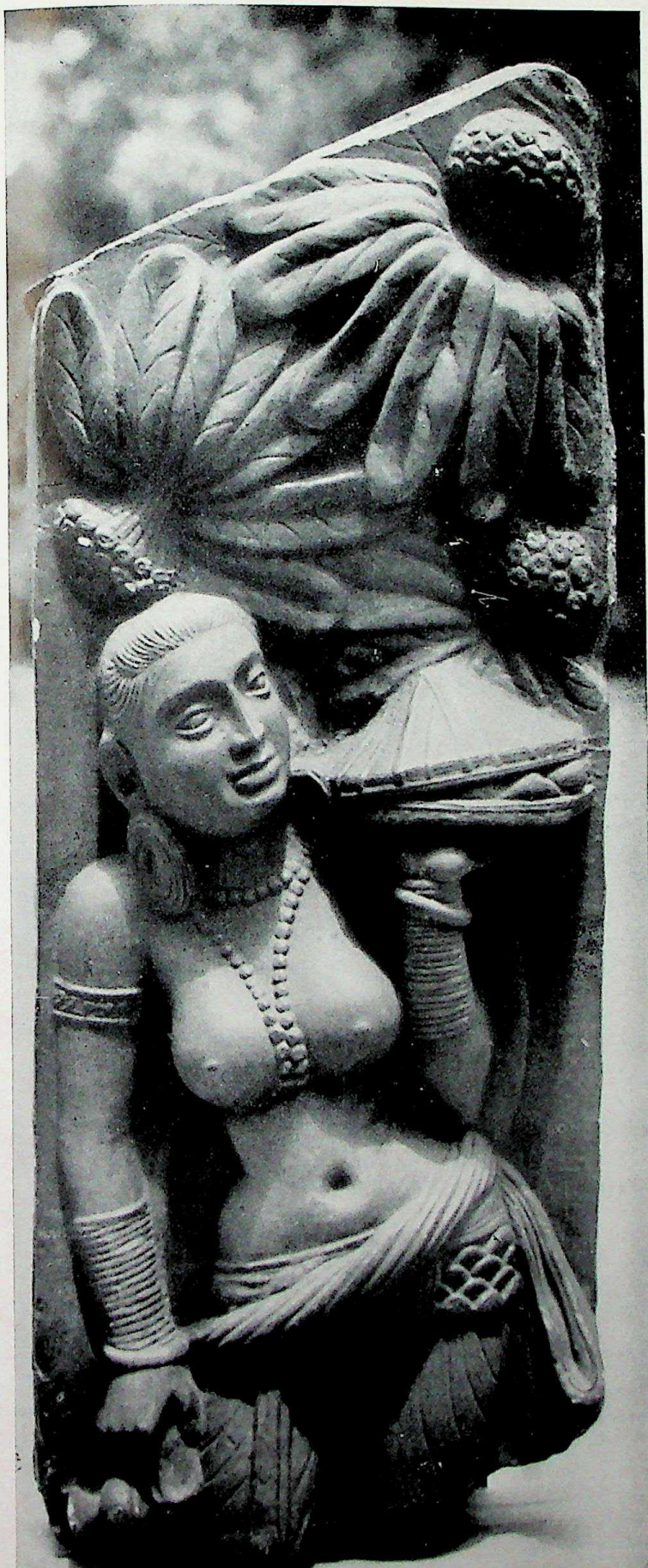

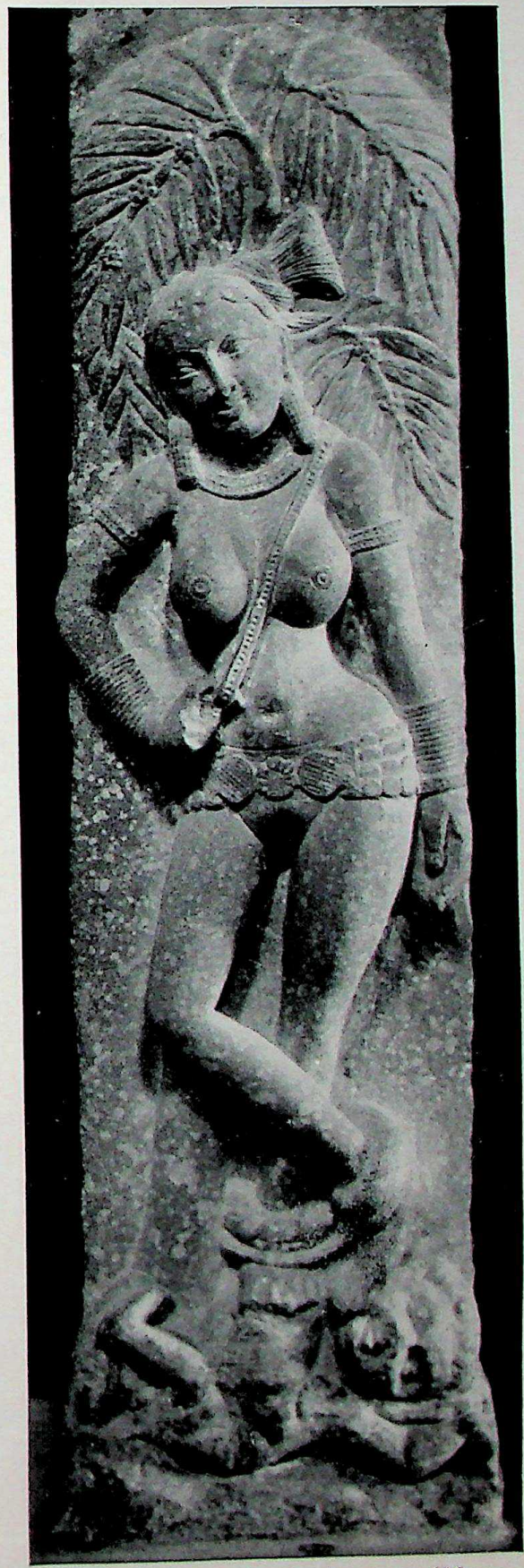

Fig. 41. Woman under Nag-kesar tree (*Mesua ferrea*) Kushan Mathura. 2 Century A.D.

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his *Sundara Nanda* in which he describes the love story of Nanda, brother of the Buddha. He compares the broken-hearted Nanda trying to conciliate his mistress to a "*naga* tree broken down by the wind from its excessive burden of flowers". Describing the apathetic mood of Nanda pining for his beloved, he writes, "The *naga* trees there, though studded with flowers with yellow interiors as if with gold-fitted caskets of ivory, no more drew the eyes of Nanda in his sorrow". In his description of a jungle in the sub-Himalayas, he describes waving kadamba trees, and the parijata tree "shining with all the qualities of majesty, and playing the king over the mandara trees and other trees laden with the bloom of the day, water-lilies and red lotuses". Ashvaghosha compares Nanda's mistress to a lotus pond, "with her laughter for the swans, her eyes for the bees, and her swelling breasts for the uprising lotus buds."

The fifth tree in Kushan sculpture, which can be identified is probably *Plumeria alba*, Linn. We find it sculptured behind a woman carrying a basket (Fig. 40). *Plumeria alba* or white Frangipani is a dwarf tree bearing clusters of shining dark green ovate leaves. It is common in Madras and Kerala. Its flowers are exquisitely scented and are in corymbs at the ends of branches (Fig. 39).

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CHAPTER VII

Amaravati

AND

Nagarjunakonda

The Amaravati stupa was discovered by Col. Mackenzie in 1797. The Raja of Chintapilly in whose territory the stupa was situated was a Shaivite. Attracted by the sanctity of a Shiva temple which existed near the site of the stupa, he decided to build a city on the spot. He despoiled the stupa and several other mounds in the neighbourhood for constructing new buildings and utilized many sculptures for making lime. Mackenzie returned to the site again in 1816. He was now Surveyor-General of Madras and saved the remaining sculptures from further vandnlism by the pious Raja. His assistants carefully copied the sculptures. 'They are unsurpassed for accuracy and beauty of finish by any drawings of their class that were ever executed in India', remarks Fergusson about these drawings. Mackenzie also sent several specimens of the sculptures to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, to Madras and to London. Walter Elliot, who was Commissioner in Guntur in 1840, excavated a portion of the monument and sent a large collection of sculptures to Madras where they lay exposed to sun and rain for 14 years. In 1856 they were sent to London and were stowed away in the coach-house of Fife House where they remained buried under rubbish till they were discovered by Fergusson in 1867. Fergusson was one of the earliest scholars to appreciate the beauty of the Buddhist-Hindu sculpture of India, the country to which he referred as 'great and most poetic region of the globe'. He described the Amaravati sculptures along with those of Sanchi in a valuable monograph, in which he drew attention to prevalence of tree and serpent worship in the remote period of her history.

The sculptures of Amaravati were executed under the patronage of Sattavahana kings from C. 200 B.C. to C. 200 A.D. Prominent among them was Siva Sri Satakarni, who was followed by Sivaskanda (A.D. 167-174). Sivaskanda was succeeded by Yajna Sri Satakarni (A.D. 175-203), who was the last king of the dynasty.

Amaravati reliefs are highly naturalistic and Coomaraswamy regards them 'as the most voluptuous and the most delicate flower of Indian sculpture'. On account of their luxuriant

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Fig. 42. Worship of Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*, Linn.) Amaravati. 1 Century A.D.

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beauty and technical proficiency they claim a unique place in Buddhist sculpture. The mature style covered the second century A.D. This was the period when Nagarjuna, the Buddhist saint, was preaching the doctrine of Mahayana. Nagarjuna's name occurs in the inscriptions in the stone railing of the Amaravati stupa. Fergusson regards Amaravati as a pictorial illustration of Mahayana Buddhism. There can be little doubt that the doctrine of Mahayana preached by Nagarjuna provided the inspiration for this great monument of Buddhism.

The usual Buddhist symbols of the Bodhi tree, the wheel and the stupa are carved in a number of sculptures. In a beautiful sculpture the pipal tree is represented and worshippers are shown adoring the tree and the foot-prints of the Buddha (Fig. 42).

Nagarjunakonda

IKSHVAKU—C. 175-250 A.D.

Nagarjunakonda means 'the hill of Nagarjuna'. This hill, which is named after the Buddhist saint Nagarjuna, is on the right bank of Krishna river in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. The Krishna is about half a mile wide here and provided navigation down to the sea. Hence it was a busy centre of commerce as well as religion, and Buddhists from Ceylon were in intimate touch with this place. This site was discovered in 1926 by A. R. Saraswati, Telugu Assistant to the Archaeological Superintendent for Epigraphy, Madras. It was explored by Longhurst who carried out excavations from 1926 to 1931 which resulted in the discovery of the large stupa known as Mahachetiya and other small stupas and viharas as well as a palace site. The bas-reliefs are in the style of Amaravati, and are in fact a continuation of the same style. Some of them bear inscriptions of a dynasty of kings called Ikshvaku who ruled this area from 2nd to 3rd centuries A.D. While the kings were followers of Brahmanism their wives were devotees of Buddhism, and it is they who erected monasteries and temples in honour of the Buddha.

In Nagarjunakonda sculptures tree symbolism is quite common. 'The Nativity and the seven Steps' of the Buddha are depicted in Fig. 43. On the left is Mayadevi standing under an asoka tree. On account of its bunches of flowers it can easily be identified as an asoka tree. In another asoka tree a parasol and two *chamaras* are carved as a mark of respect for the child Gautama who is held by a woman. Below is a water-pot denoting the child's first bath while on the right, holding the long cloth on which the child made seven steps, are the Guardian Deities of the Four Quarters. The seven steps are represented by seven tiny foot-prints on the cloth.

The Bodhi tree is shown in another sculpture depicting Ajatasatru's visit to the Buddha. The Buddha can be distinguished by ringlets on his head and a halo around his face, and in the background is the Bodhi tree (Fig. 44).

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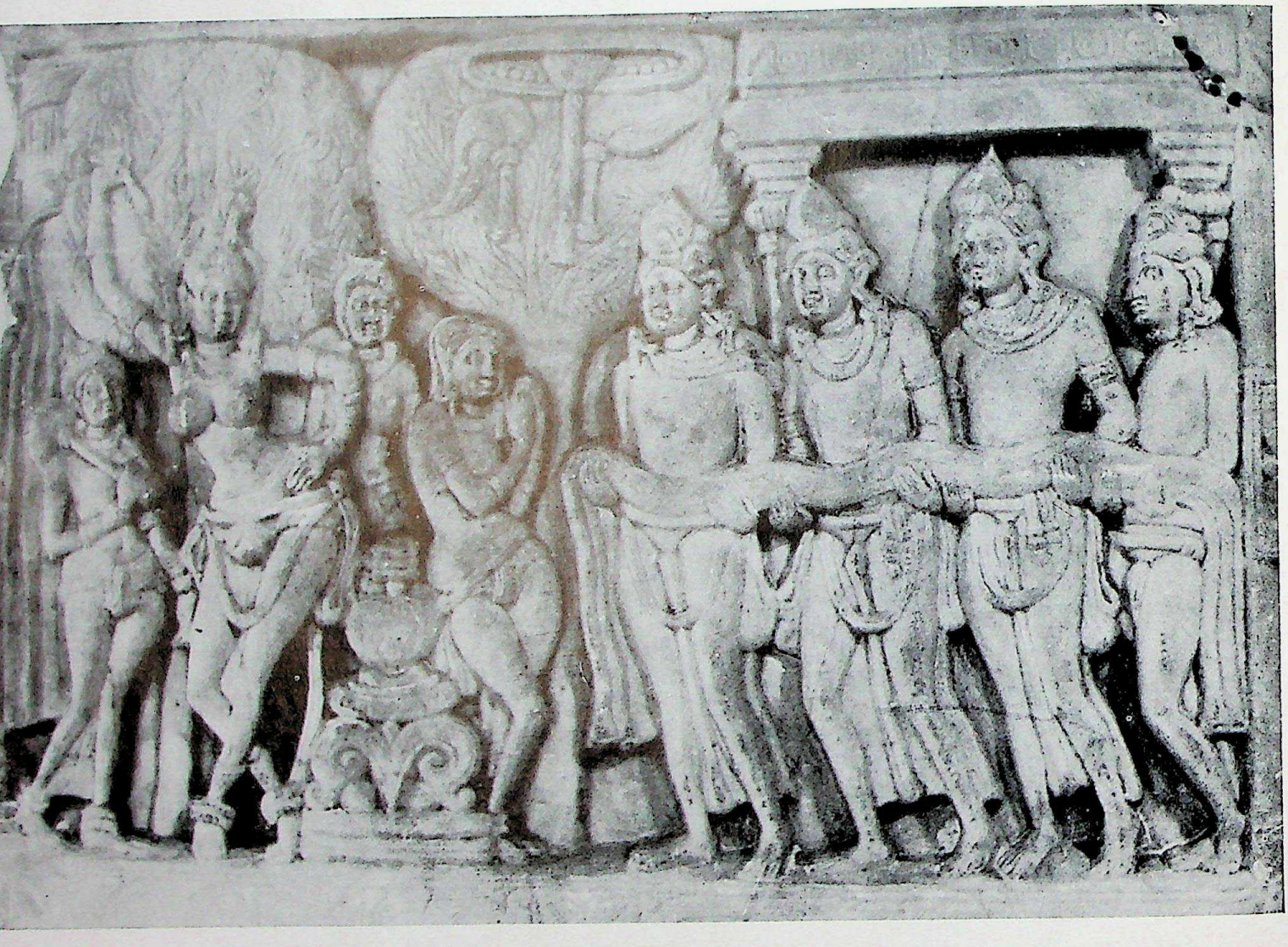

Fig. 43. Birth of the Buddha under an Asoka tree (*Saraca indica* Linn.), Nagarjunakonda. 2 Century A.D.

There is another interesting panel depicting conversion of Nanda, the half-brother of the Buddha. His conversion is the subject of the beautiful Sanskrit poem entitled *Saundarananda* by Ashvaghosha. The story of Nanda's conversion is as follows. "Nanda received the ordination not of his own inclination but in order to avoid displeasing the Buddha. He therefore, did not practise the religious exercises required of a monk ; but was pining away in grief at the separation from his beautiful wife Sundari whom he had but recently espoused. In order to take Nanda's thoughts away from Sundari and to lead him to the realisation of the Truth, the Buddha adopted the following device. By his supernatural power he took Nanda on a visit to heaven and on the way, in flying over the Himalayas, he drew Nanda's attention to a she-monkey blinded in one eye. On arrival in heaven, the enchanting celestial nymphs

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came to pay homage to the Buddha who asked Nanda what he thought of them. He said there was as much difference between the nymphs and Sundari as there was between the latter and the monkey. Nanda was smitten with desire for the nymphs and the Buddha told him that the only way to achieve this purpose was to perform his religious exercises in real earnest. On returning to earth, Nanda applied himself vigorously to meditation, with the object of attaining the company of the nymphs ; but the result was that he came an arhat, and his desire for the nymphs as well as for Sundari, ceased to exist."[1] The tree under which the apsaras are shown is an asoka with hanging leaves and bunches of flowers (Fig. 45). The asoka tree is also shown in another sculpture where a maiden, standing on a lion, is holding the branch of a flowering asoka (Fig. 46).

1. Longhurst, *The Buddhist Antiquities af Nagarjunakonda.*

Fig. 44. Ajatasatru's visit to Buddha, Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.) in the background, Nagarjunakonda. 2 Century A.D.

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Among the sculpture showing the events from the life of the Buddha are panels showing amorous couples. It is strange how religion and erotics are juxtaposed in these sculptures particularly when one bears in mind the puritanism of Buddhism. *Michelia champaca* Linn. is depicted in one of these reliefs with an amorous couple in front (Fig. 47).

Fig. 45. Nanda's visit to heaven, Asoka trees are shown, Nagarjunakonda. 2 Century A.D.

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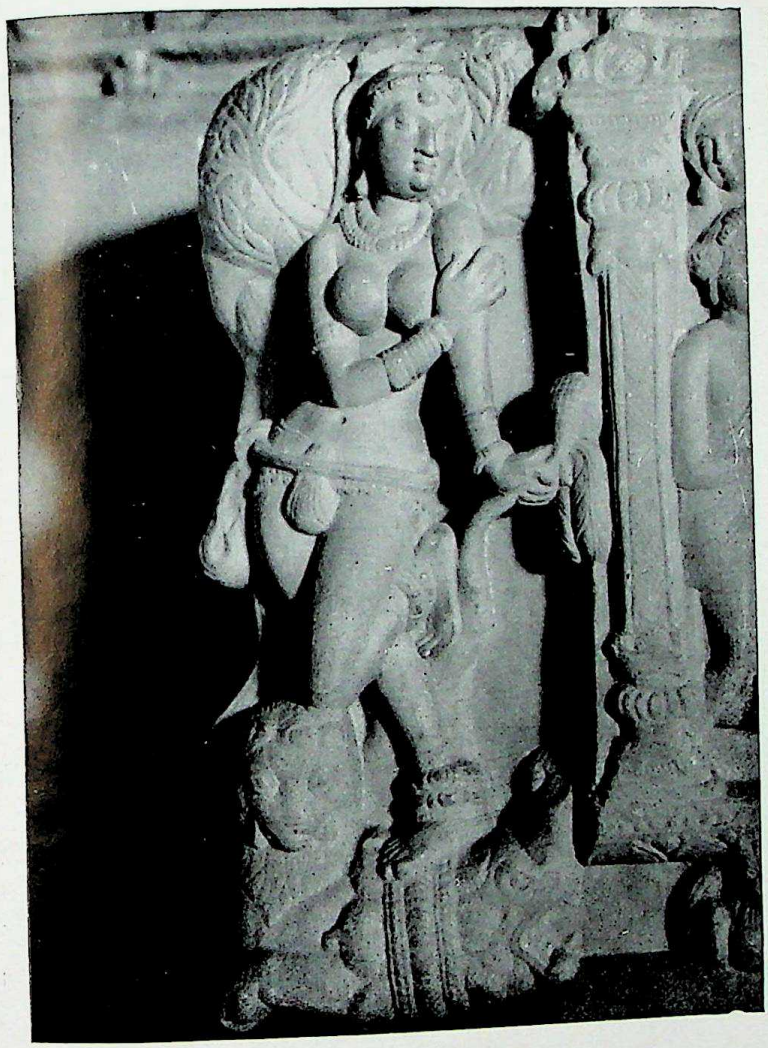

Fig. 46. A Salibhanjika holding a branch of Asoka (*Saraca indica* Linn.) Nagarjunakonda. 2 Century A.D.

Fig. 47. An amorous couple, *Michelia champaca* Linn. in the background, Nagarjunakonda. 2 Century A.D.

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CHAPTER VIII

Gupta

C. 320-600 A.D.

Gupta era 319-20 A.D. begins with Chandragupta I who ruled at Pataliputra and extended his kingdom up to Prayag. His successor, Samudragupta, extended the kingdom to Sutlej in the north and also made conquests in south India. Chandragupta II, also known as Vikramaditya, conquered Malwa, Ujjain and Saurashtra. In the close of the 5th century and in early 6th century the Guptas were fighting the white Huns who invaded northern India.

The Gupta period covers the years 320-600 A.D. and is described as the Golden Age of Hinduism. The art of sculpture and Sanskrit literature reached their highest level of development. Gupta age is usually described as the age of the revival of Hinduism. More correctly, it was the age of co-existence of Buddhism and Hinduism. This is proved by the fact that the finest Buddha images from Mathura and Sarnath were carved during this period. Coomaraswamy is of the opinion that the Buddha image developed independently in Gandhara and in Mathura in response to a demand created by Buddhist pilgrims. In each case it was the work of local craftsmen working in the local tradition. Later on the fusion of the Greek and Indian elements took place and in Mathura and Sarnath Buddha images we see elegant drapery combined with spiritual calm. The famous Buddha image from Mathura dating from 2nd century A.D. has the leaves of pipal tree carved behind it. In the 5th century images of the Gupta period from Mathura and Sarnath pipal leaves are no longer shown, but instead there is a sculptured disc which also serves as halo.

Deogarh temple is one of the finest monuments of Gupta art. Anecdotes from the Ramayana are elegantly carved at the sides of this temple. In the panel showing the chopping of the nose of Shurpanakha by Lakshmana, the scene is laid in a hut covered with a flowering asoka. Rama is sitting in a corner of the hut and Sita stands demurely behind him and Lakshmana. Drooping leaves of asoka and its bunches of flowers lend a pleasant note to an otherwise grim scene (Fig. 48).

The asoka is intimately associated with Sita. When she was in Lanka, a captive of Ravana, she was sheltering in a grove of asoka trees. Where the Kosi river leaves the mountains

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Fig. 48. A scene from the Ramayana. Shurpanakha's nose being cut by Lakshmana. Flowering Asoka (*Saraca indica* Linn.) on the top. Deogarh. 5 Century A.D.

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there is a beautiful grove of asoka trees, and legend has it that Sita and Rama were so much enchanted by the beauty of their flowers that they made this grove, their home for some time. As the author of *Skanda Purana* relates, "Sita was charmed by the beautiful forest, and said to Rama, 'It is the month of *Baisakh*, let us stay in this wood and bathe in the water of the river'." So they made their abode there, and on their return to Ayodhya, the name of the place was changed to Sitabani, or the 'Grove of Sita'. Sita did not forget the charm of the forest trees and pleasures of the bath in the river. Surrounded by the palace luxuries of Ayodhya on return from exile, she still pined for the jungle. Says she to Rama, "I long once more to wander through the shades of the brown woods, and plunge amidst the waves of Bhagirathi's cool translucent stream."

The asoka tree is carved with a great sense of realism in the Deogarh Ramayana panels, and it seems that the sculptors were familiar with asoka trees which were commonly grown in Buddhist-Hindu gardens. Compare the work of these sculptors with those from Gandhara. As Vincent Smith says "their lotuses are often unrecognisable and also their trees". This is due to the fact that they were working in the cold temperate region of Peshawar and Rawalpindi where asoka trees and lotuses do not grow. Even the woman and tree motif, which Foucher regards as 'la pose plastique par excellence' of India on account of the fact that it displays the charm of female form to best advantage is executed in a most clumsy manner in Gandhara sculptures, and it is difficult to tell what tree had been sculpted by the artist.

According to Vincent Smith the woman and tree motif occurs in Greek art in the fourth century B.C. In Aachen pulpit in Germany ivory images of Copto-Alexandrian school are to be found. One of them shows a young man standing with legs crossed holding the branch of a vine. This has been identified as a representation of Bacchus. Why a youth has taken the place of a woman is possibly due to the homo-sexual tendencies of the Greeks. Vincent Smith points out that in one case a woman takes place of the youth and he feels 'no difficulty in believing the transference of Alexandrian ideas to India before or after the Christian era'. We have already explained how the motif came to be associated with the nativity legend of the Buddha and became a fertility symbol, and Vincent Smith's suggestion is nothing but far-fetched.

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CHAPTER IX

Ellora

7TH-9TH CENTURY A.D.

The Ellora cave temples contain the finest examples of Hindu sculpture from 7th to 9th centuries. The stone images of Shiva and Vishnu wear an expression of majestic calm. The female figures are exquisitely graceful. Apart from the images of gods, tree-goddesses and river-goddesses also adorn the cave temples. In cave 21 there is a beautiful image of a *vrikshaka* standing under a flowering asoka tree with two children on sides (Fig. 49). Another *vrikshaka* stands under a fruiting mango tree (Fig. 50). Both these images are from 7th century A.D. In cave 32 there is a standing image of Gomateswara entwined by a creeper. It is difficult to identify the creeper which seems to be an imaginary creation. The figure surrounded by the creeper is shown lost in contemplation (Fig. 53). In cave 32 there is a standing image of Gomateswara entwined by a creeper. This is the standard manner in which Gomateswara images are sculptured. In Sravanabelagola in Mysore State the Gomateswara colossus is also represented in a similar manner. The leaves of the plant twining have a strange resemblance with the Asoka tree. It is mentioned that Vardhamana Mahavira was born in Kundagram in Vaishali, which is 27 miles north of Patna. At the age of 30 he became an ascetic. His "great renunciation was made outside Vaishali, under an Asoka tree, and Vardhamana now entered upon an ascetic life. This was in the year 570 B.C."[1] After discarding his clothes he practised severe austerities. It is said that "one day, when he was staying in a place called Jrimbhakagrama, seated in deep meditation under an Asoka tree, light suddenly flashed upon him and he attained 'intuitive knowledge' or 'Kevala Jnana'. He became Jina, the conqueror, or Mahavira, the Great Hero."[2]

In cave 33 there is a colossal image of Indra seated on an elephant under a banyan tree (Fig. 51). Opposite this figure is an image of Indrani, his wife, seated on a lion under a mango tree laden with fruit (Fig. 52).

The river-goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are represented standing on *makara*, a crocodile-like creature and on tortoise respectively. The rides of the goddesses have been aptly chosen for Yamuna flows lazily, while the current of Ganga is fast. In the Chandragupta cave at

1. Gupte and Mahajan, *Ajanta, Ellora and Aurangabad Caves* p. 130.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

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Fig. 49. Bracket figure with Asoka (*Saraca indica* Linn.) in the background, Cave 21, Ellora. 7 Century A.D.

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Fig. 50. Bracket figure under a Mango tree (*Mangifera indica*), Cave 21, Ellora. 7 Century A.D.

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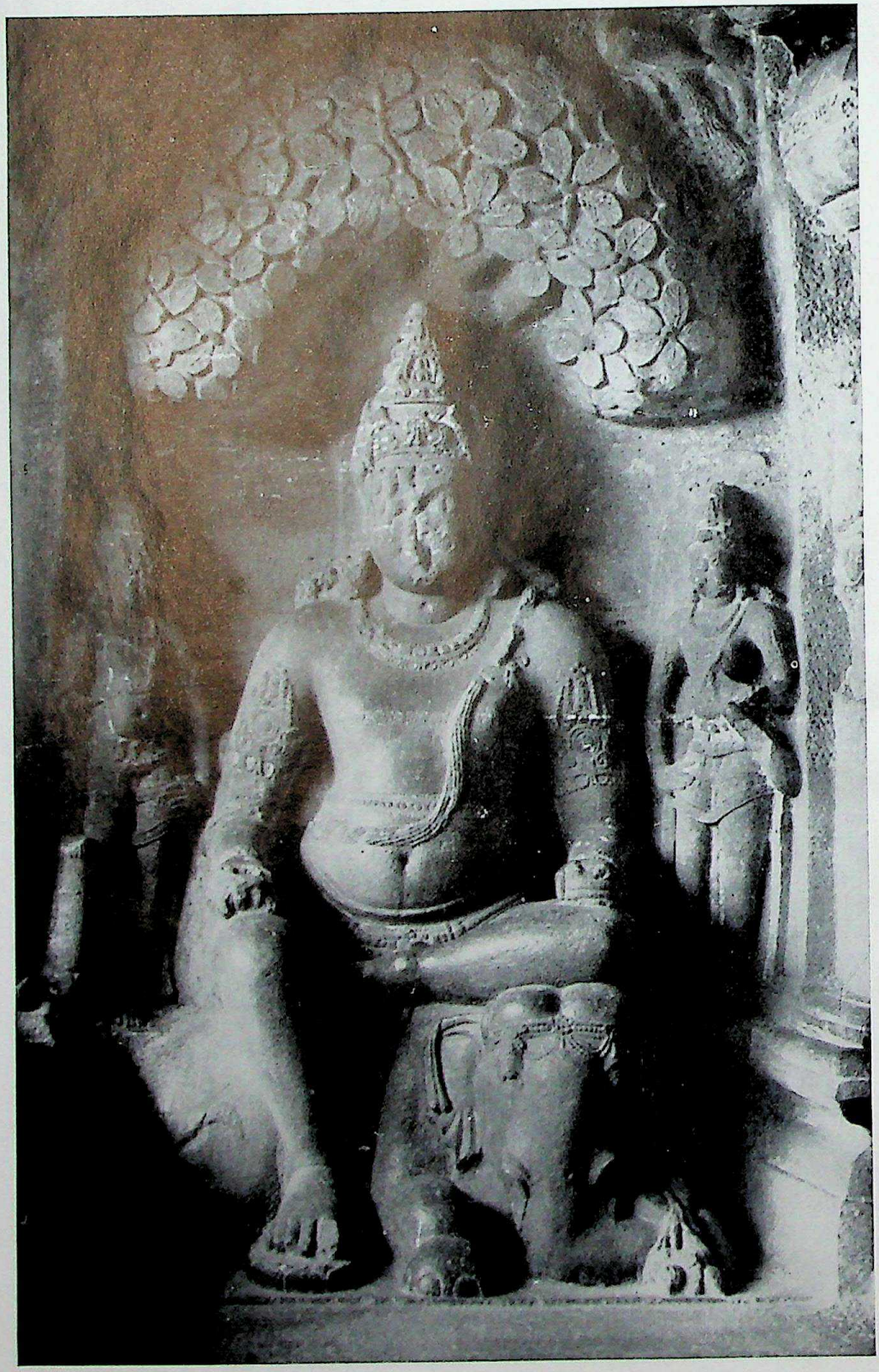

Fig. 51. A Jain deity Indra under Banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis* Linn.), Cave 33, Ellora. 750—850 A.D.

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Udaigiri, excavated in 401-2 A.D., these river-goddesses are represented without their respective vehicles, and they stand beneath trees in the woman-and-tree posture. Cunningham believes that originally they were tree spirits like the Yakshis of Bharhut and only became river deities later. The Besnagar Ganga (C. 500 A.D.) stands on a *makara* below the branches of a fruit-bearing mango tree. In the 7th century Ellora sculpture the river-goddesses are recognisable only by their rides, and they are no longer shown standing under trees. Here we see a complete transformation from the tree-goddesses to river-goddesses.

Fig. 52. Indrani under a Mango tree (*Mangifera indica* Linn.), Cave 33, Ellora. 750—850 A.D.

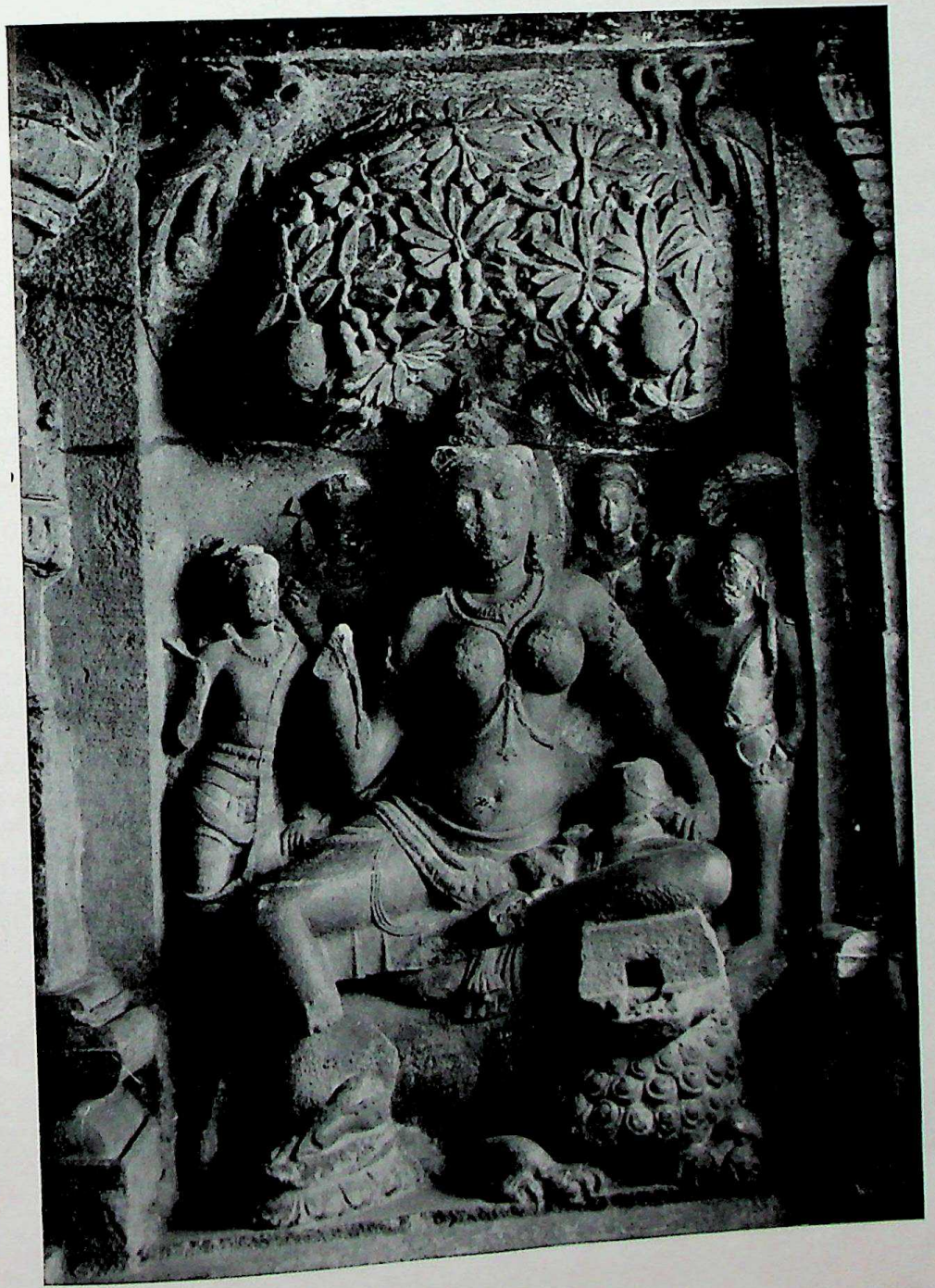

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Fig. 53. Gomateshwara entwined with creepers, Cave 32, Ellora. 9 Century A.D.

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CHAPTER X

Mediaeval

900-1200 A.D.

The cult of trees dominates the sculpture of Bharhut, Sanchi and Kushan Mathura. With the evolution and development of the Buddha image during the Gupta period, the trees were relegated to the background. Mystic calm was now the main concern of the sculptors who chiselled Buddha and Vishnu images. The sculptors of the mediaeval period were obsessed with the beauty of female form and sensual charm of conjugating human couples. In the sculptures of Khajuraho and Orissan temples stones are convulsed with the ecstasy of love. In the exposition of the beauty of human form the sculptors used every device, and their beautiful images in voluptous postures peep at us from the niches of these temples. The classical woman-and-tree pose, which was the most enchanting device invented by their predecessors, was not entirely forgotten, though not frequently seen. In the Lakshmana Temple at Khajuraho (C. 1000 A.D.) there is a charming bracket figure of a woman under a mango tree (Fig. 54). On the walls of the Rajarani temple at Bhubaneshwar (1100 A.D.) is a proud Amazon holding the branch of a flowering asoka (Fig. 55). In the Sun Temple at Konarak; constructed a century later, some figures of women are shown holding branches of trees. The trees are carved in a purely symbolic manner giving no indication of the species. Such figures are, however, very rare, and we generally notice the transformation of the Yakshis into charming female musicians which adorn the roof of the temple.

South India has a rich tropical vegetation. This tropical luxuriance is reflected in the profusion of images which adorn the gopurams of the temples, and in South Indian sculptures from 13th century onwards. In the Hoyleshwara temple built in the 13th century at Halebid in Mysore the Govardhan mountain which Krishna is supporting on his finger-tips is covered with a forest of mangoes and plantains (Fig. 56).

The great tradition of woman-and-tree motif in sculpture virtually comes to an end in the 12th century. Perhaps this was a fitting culmination to a great theme, for India was now overrun by hordes of Islamic iconoclasts who not only broke the images but also in due course destroyed the vast forests of northern India. Not only trees were cut but saplings were mercilessly nibbled by the flocks of goats, who converted West Punjab from a green and flourishing land into a virtual desert.

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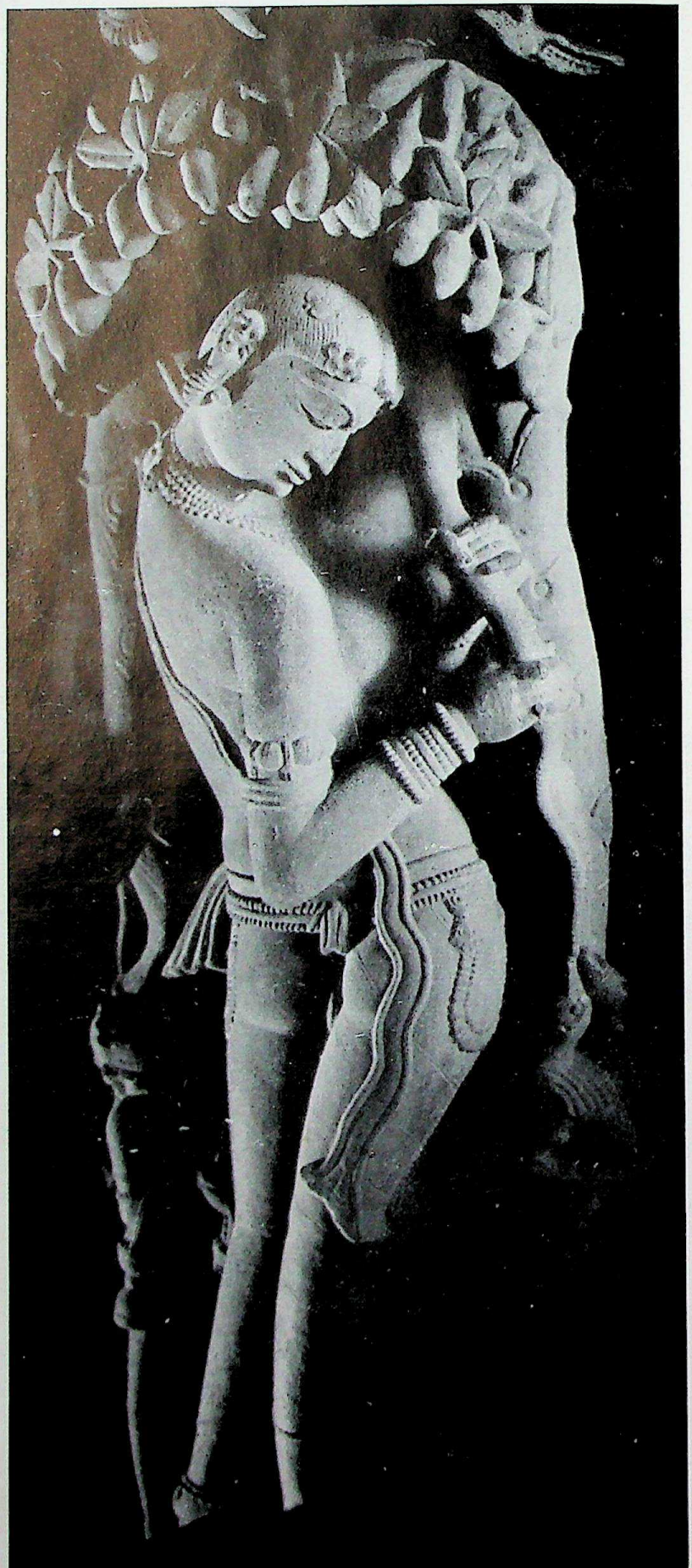

Fig. 54. Bracket figure under Mango tree (*Mangifera indica* Linn.), Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho. C. 1000 A.D.

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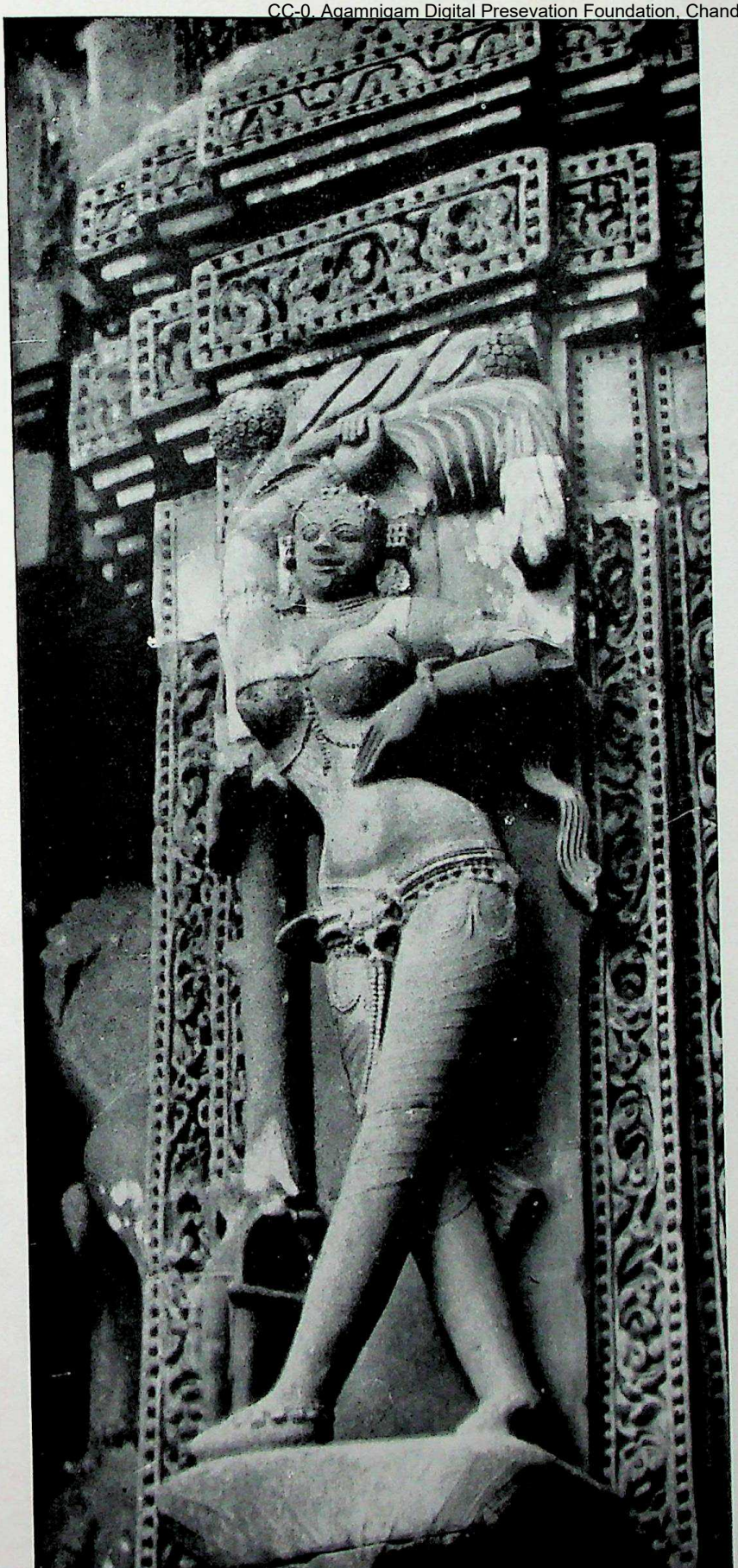

Fig. 55. A lady holding the branch of flowering Asoka (*Saraca indica* Linn.). Rajarani temple, Bhubaneshwar. C. 1100 A.D.

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Fig. 56. Krishna holding the mountain Govardhan. The mountain is covered with mangoes and plantains. Hoyleshwar temple, Halebid. 13 Century A.D.

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CHAPTER XI

Tree Worship in Present-day India

Though we no longer see the tree in sculptures after the 12th-13th centuries, the reverence for trees still remains deep in the hearts of the Hindus in villages of India. They still regard the pipal as a sacred tree and as a symbol of Vishnu. Women worship the pipal, circumambulate it, wrap yards of cotton yarn on its trunk and pour water over its roots.

The pipal and *neem* trees are commonly grown together in Mysore State. The pipal is regarded as symbol of the male and *neem* as symbol of the female and a ceremonial marriage of these trees is performed. A platform of stones is built round the trees on which three snake stones are usually placed. The coiled snakes are also a symbol of fertility and are worshipped by the villagers. On the contrary *neem* is regarded as a male in Rajasthan and the desert areas of the Punjab, and women cover their faces on the sight of this tree as from a stranger.

It is in the State of Orissa, which was once a vast forest and is inhabited by a large number of tribes, some still in a very primitive stage, that tree worship is most current. In the compound of the temple at Sakhigopal in Puri District of Orissa, there is a *tamala* tree (*Cinnamomum tamala*) which is worshipped as an incarnation of Krishna. Round the trunk of the tree a dhoti is wrapped and higher up where the trunk branches is placed a garland of wild flowers. The tree is worshipped by women who are in need of off-spring. I saw this tree in 1959. In Orissa banyan and pipal trees are grown together and are ceremonially married. Banyan is a symbol of the male and the pipal a symbol of the female. Unlucky husbands who lose two wives in succession are married to a *Stribulus asper* tree. After this the man is free to contract the third marriage.

Verrier Elwin thus describes the origin of Dumariya clan which takes its name from the Dumar, viz. *Ficus glomerata* : "A man and his wife had no child. The husband used to sigh and say, 'If only we had a child !' One day, as he was wandering sad and disappointed through the forest, he sat down to rest under a fig tree (*Ficus glomerata* Roxb.). When he saw the figs hanging many and ripe above him he thought, 'If only my wife was like this tree, what happiness we would have'. Now in this tree was a hole about the height of a man's waist above the ground. The man went to the tree in this hole. In due time a human child was born from one of the figs and he was the father of the Dumariya clan." [1]

1. Verrier Elwin, "*Notes on the Juang*", *Man in India*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1.

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The Semribok tribe regard the silk cotton (*Bombax malabaricum*) as sacred. It was thus that the tree acquired the aura of sanctity. "Long ago when the Juang were bringing the Raja of Keonjhar by force to his kingdom and his people were pursuing them, one of the Juang was caught. He swore on a tiger's skin, on earth from an ant-hill, on his own head that he had nothing to do with the affair. The Mayurbhanj people said, 'Stand under this *semur* tree. We will cut it down and it will fall on you. If you are unhurt and no blood comes from the wounds made by the thorns we will believe you. Otherwise we will kill you'. That Juang whispered to the tree, 'If you fall lightly as a flower upon me, I will worship you as a god'. The Mayurbhanj people then cut the tree and it fell with a great crash. But wherever it touched the Juang it was like the brushing of many flowers and he was unhurt. He was released, and ever since his family has worshipped the *semur* tree. They never cut it and if they find anyone damaging it they abuse him." [2]

The Tariyaparabok clan regard the toddy palm as their god. The origin of this legend is as follows. "A man and his wife had no children. One day the man brought home a toddy fruit to his wife and forced her to eat it. She became pregnant as a result and a child was born. Since that day we never cut the toddy palm or drink its juice. It is our god." [3]

The siris (*Albizzia procera* Benth.) is regarded as an aristocrat among trees. The leaves of siris and mango are considered sacred and are hung over the door of the birth-chamber of a male child. The banyan is also held sacred and only in the direst extremes of famine are its leaves cut for feeding cattle.

The jand (*Prosopis spicigera* Linn.) is reverenced by the people in Punjab and Rajasthan and is commonly selected to mark the abode of a deity. Flags and streamers are offered to the tree by worshippers which hang from its branches. The Bishnois object to the lopping of a jand growing by the side of a pond, as according to their belief, it leads to feuds and bloodshed. In West Punjab the jand is worshipped by women for children. Latif states, "It is presented with wreaths of flowers, fanned and pressed with both hands for hours together, that the kind mother may be propitiated. A marriage procession must go to her, to offer benedictions, if the kind mother is not far. If at a distance, she has yet power to make men and women happy. The astonished spectator may often find a Hindu girl, in the Jhang and Multan districts, standing before the jandi mother with downcast and tearful eyes, praying in musical tones : 'I have come to the grand darbar of Jandi to solicit from her the gift of a child'. Another young woman may be found prostrating herself before the goddess, singing : 'The darbar of Jandi is ever brilliant with lamps, Give me a baby to play in my lap ; O Jandi, thy lamps are ever shining.' [4]

The deodar (*Cedrus deodara* Loud.) is held sacred in Western Himalayas and its groves shelter many ancient temples in Kumaon and Kulu valleys. Pieces of iron are offered to the deity of the deodar tree. It is a common sight to see the deodar tree studded with iron nails. The

2. Verrier Elwin, "*Notes on the Juang*", *Man in India*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Latif, *History of the Punjab from the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Time*, p. 43.

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deodar is supposed to cure diseases in men and cattle, to protect the flocks of sheep and also ensure good crops to the farmers.

In some villages in Punjab sacred groves are still preserved. Nobody is allowed to cut wood from these groves for domestic purposes. When someone dies in the village then alone wood is cut for cremating the corpse. The superstitious dread of the tree-spirits has saved many natural forests which otherwise would have been wiped out by now.

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